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THE WRONG ROAD

BY HOOK OR CROOK.

BY

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'FAST AND LOOSE,' 'LOCKED UP,' ETC.



TORONTO :

THE NATIONAL PUBLISHING COMPANY.

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the year 1888, by the
NATIONAL PUBLISHING COMPANY, in the Office of the Minister of
Agriculture, Ottawa.

THE WRONG ROAD.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS MALADY.

THERE was intense excitement at Straddlethorpe Hall. The young owner, Sir Carysfort Lezaire, had been seized with a sudden illness, and lay at the point of death. The local doctor had been summoned from Market Reepham, and had given the young baronet his best attention from the moment of the first attack. But Mr. Freshener, although a duly qualified practitioner, confessed that he was utterly at fault.

Sir Carysfort had been perfectly well that same afternoon. It was not till the end of dinner that he complained of nausea and violent pains in the intestines. Lady Lezaire, his devoted mother, who watched over every ache and pain of her beloved son with an unremitting attention, immediately begged Sir Carysfort to take to his bed.

Directly she got him safe between the sheets, she tried the usual panaceas familiar to nursery treatment. Ginger cordials, hot bottles, fomentations, and such simple remedies were applied, but with no effect. The nausea continued, and soon developed into violent fits of sickness. Sir Carysfort now also complained of terrible pain and depression.

By this time Lady Lezaire's anxiety was communicated to the rest of the household. Her daughter, Mrs. St. Evelyn, appeared in the sick-room, and begged to be allowed to share in the nursing. Colonel St. Evelyn, her son-in-law, expressed equal solicitude, and, much against her will, came and sat by the sick lad's bedside.

The evening drew on, and Sir Carysfort's condition certainly did not improve.

"Mr. Freshener must be sent for, and that without loss of time," said Lady Lezaire.

"Do you think that necessary?" asked Colonel St. Evelyn, who still continued in the room. "It is nothing more than a bilious attack. Carysfort is always so imprudent. Where has he been to-day? Does any one know?"

"Fishing," cried another voice from the bottom of the bed. "I was with him."

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The speaker was young Hubert Podifat, who, like a favourite hound, had taken his post by Sir Carysfort's bedside a couple of hours before. No one had noticed the young man particularly; it was thought quite natural that he should devote himself to his patron and friend.

"I insist upon having a doctor!" repeated Lady Lezaire, imperatively. "If you will not send a message for me, Ferdinand, I must do it myself."

"Let me go," interposed Hubert, eagerly.

"You are a good boy," Lady Lezaire said. "Tell Gibbings to send one of the grooms off, mounted, to Market Reephams."

"It is really quite preposterous," said the colonel, with some irritation. "I wonder you don't keep a doctor permanently upon the premises."

Lady Lezaire did not deign to reply, but looked at her son in-law in a manner which did not betoken much ardent affection.

"I suppose I am not wanted any more," said the Colonel; "but if I can be of the least use, pray send for me. You will find me in the study down-stairs."

He retired to his own sanctum, and was presently enjoying a Trichinopoly cheroot, and the latest edition of Ruff's Guide.

Quite an hour elapsed before Mr. Freshener arrived. By this time Sir Carysfort's sufferings were aggravated in every particular—the former symptoms continued unchanged, and in addition he complained of a hot skin, a dry parched throat, his gums were swollen, and there was much salivation of the tongue.

"I really am quite perplexed," said little Mr. Freshener. "I don't understand it at all."

"Is it a case quite beyond your skill?" asked Lady Lezaire. "Can you do nothing for my poor boy?"

"The symptoms are most peculiar," replied the local doctor, "and the only treatment that suggests itself, I am not prepared to administer."

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Lady Lezaire. "I have a medicine-chest."

"Yes, my lady; but have you a stomach-pump?"

"I am afraid not. Is it necessary?"

"Not absolutely, I trust; but it is the simplest treatment that occurs to me. If you will allow me, I will send my man back to the surgery for that and other requisites. Meanwhile, I will try bleeding, and if possible let Sir Carysfort have a warm bath."

The doctor's messenger went and returned, but the baronet's condition remained much the same.

"I really do not know what to do. I never was so perplexed," the little doctor repeated again and again.

"Perhaps you would like other advice called in," suggested Lady Lezaire. "Do not hesitate. Everything shall be done that the case may demand. My darling boy's health comes before everything else. Whom would you suggest?"

"Well, my lady, in a case so obscure, the brightest lights of the profession alone can guide us. If I might venture to suggest, I should say summon Sir Peregrine Falcon."

"All the way from London?" put in a new voice. It was that of Colonel St. Evelyn, who had returned. "Have you any idea, Lady Lezaire, what his fee would be? Those great swells charge at so much a mile."

"What is that compared with the life of my child?" She turned indignantly from her son-in-law, and said to Mr. Freshener, "Do you suppose, Mr. Freshener, that Sir Peregrine would come?"

"Failing him, we can send for Dr. John Robinson. I should advise your wiring for both."

"I may repeat, I think this very unnecessary," said Colonel St. Evelyn.

"I cannot see that it is any affair of yours," replied Lady Lezaire; "and in a matter of such vital importance I shall act as I think best."

Telegrams were forthwith indited and despatched. Silence closed on the sick-room, broken only by the coming and going of the attendants, and the groans and hard breathing of the unfortunate patient as he writhed in agony on his bed of pain,

Let me pause here to state that Straddlethorpe was in a Midland county, more than a hundred miles from town.

The night was now so far advanced that, even if the telegrams reached Harley Street before morning, there was but little chance of Sir Peregrine Falcon or his colleague catching anything earlier than the newspaper-train. This would bring them to Market Deepham by about 7.30 A.M., whence a carriage could drive them over to the Hall in about half an hour. Nine or ten long hours intervened till then, and, as Mr. Freshener pointed out, all that could be done was to carefully tend and nurse Sir Carysfort through the night. It was just possible that unremitting care and the continual application of the remedies recommended might keep him alive till the following day.

It was arranged that Mr. Freshener should remain with his patient all night. Lady Lezaire and Mrs. St. Evelyn, assisted by Mrs. Lelu, the housekeeper, agreed to sit up with him also, and nothing could induce the devoted Podifat to go to bed.

That terrible night dragged itself slowly along. Fresh paroxysms and crises constantly supervened, but Sir Carysfort struggled bravely through them all. Towards dawn Lady Lezaire, worn out with watching and anxiety, dozed off to sleep. Mrs. St. Evelyn, although equally worn out, gently woke her mother, and begged her to lie down, if only for an hour.

"I will remain with dear Carysfort until you have rested. You will be fresher then to see Sir Peregrine when he arrives."

After much entreaty Lady Lezaire reluctantly yielded to her daughter's earnest solicitations. Mrs. St. Evelyn also persuaded Hubert Podifat to retire for a time. Mr. Freshener withdrew to the

library, where a light supper was laid out for him, and for the moment Mrs. St. Evelyn was left alone with her brother.

Sir Carysfort seemed somewhat easier as the light grew stronger. The season was spring, the weather warm, and the chirping of the awakening birds was heard through the casements as they greeted the returning day. Sir Carysfort turned his lack-lustre eyes towards the windows, and made a feeble motion as if praying for more air. Mrs. St. Evelyn readily interpreted the unspoken wish, and threw up one of the sashes. The morning breeze came in, laden with the fragrance of a thousand blossoms, and for a moment Mrs. St. Evelyn leant out, as if seeking to fully realize their sweetness.

As she stood there, with her back to the room, she was suddenly startled by the pressure of a hand lightly laid upon her shoulder. Turning hastily, she saw that it was her husband.

"Oh, Ferdy, how you frightened me! I did not hear you come in."

"I was afraid of disturbing poor Carysfort, so I trod as lightly as I could. How is he?"

"Better, I think. He has been free from nausea for nearly an hour."

"But you, my dearest child, you must be nearly done up. How is it I find you all by yourself?"

"I insisted upon mother going off to bed, and Hubert has also just left the room. I am not in the least tired; I shall have plenty of time to rest by-and-by."

"You are a true soldier's wife, Rachel, and rise to emergencies. I never thought my quiet little woman would have come out so strong."

She turned up her face to his with the gratified gaze of a child who has been commended. It was a childish face still, with no great strength or firmness about it—sweet, womanly, and confiding.

Colonel St. Evelyn stooped his head and kissed her gently on the lips.

"Is there anything I can do? May I not share your hours of watching?"

"No, my dearest husband. The sick-room is not the place for a man. Besides, we shall want you to receive the great London doctor when he arrives. Come, Ferdy, be persuaded, and go off to bed."

Colonel St. Evelyn passed his arm round his wife's waist, and again kissed her. Thus they approached Sir Carysfort's bedside, and together stood looking at his face. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be asleep, undisturbed for the moment by his late excruciating pains. Mrs. St. Evelyn parted from her husband at the door, and returning to her place sat quietly watching, ready to attend instantly to her brother's needs.

By-and-by Sir Carysfort awoke, and muttered almost unintelligibly a querulous demand for drink. A tumbler of lime-juice and water stood by the bedside, and this Mrs. St. Evelyn applied at once

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to his lips. Sir Carysfort took a long draught, and again sank back on his pillow.

Another hour passed, and the Hall gradually aroused itself from the slumbers of the night. There were the usual sounds of feet hurrying along the corridors, bells ringing, and the general movements that showed the servants were astir.

Lady Lezaire was still in her room. Mrs. Leleu, the housekeeper, who had shared the last night's watch with Mrs. St. Evelyn, had also retired to rest. Hubert Podifat was nowhere to be seen, nor Colonel St. Evelyn. Rachel was alone in the sick-room.

From her now came a terrified summons to the household. The young baronet was much worse. A new paroxysm had supervened, and the old agonizing symptoms had reappeared, enhanced fourfold.

"It is most extraordinary," said Mr Freshener, who thus characterized everything new in his experience. "And I understand, Mrs. St. Evelyn, that until just now he seemed certainly better?"

"Yes," replied the baronet's sister, "Carysfort had been sleeping quite quietly ever since Mrs. Leleu left him, and this is the first fit that has attacked him for several hours."

"It is most extraordinary," the country practitioner could only say; "I am quite perplexed."

"Oh! if the London doctors would only arrive! What, what, can detain them?" cried Lady Lezaire, in an agony of heartfelt despair.

CHAPTER II.

COLONEL ST. EVELYN.

WHILE the unhappy mother and sister are tending the sore-stricken lad let us retrace our steps to a time antecedent by just a couple of years.

The scene is the *table d'hôte* of the Roches Noires, Trouville, in the height of summer.

The guests were of all nationalities. French predominated, of course, but there were representatives of almost all nations, Christians of every category and color, their distinctive characteristics showing plainly through the somewhat uniform veneer of a common civilization.

Table traits were no less clearly particularized than personal appearance. Here the Frenchman chopped up his meat, then fed himself with his fork, as though he was still in the nursery, and could not be trusted with a knife; there the Teuton might with advantage have been deprived of an implement he seemed to mistake for a spoon, but which he handled with the skill of an Indian juggler accustomed to swallow swords. Aristocratic ladies washed their mouths out and spat in the finger glasses; the use of toothpicks was

by no means tabooed ; napkins, having one end knotted and fastened into the collar, hung pendant like an infant's bib ; greedy English youths piled up their plates with green peas, and then poured them like fluid down their ravenous throats.

Above all, above the jingling of glasses, the clatter of knives and forks, the racing to and fro of an army of waiters, rose the never-ending clacking of hundreds of tongues—a Babel of voices, French, German, English, in all varieties of idiom and accent—so inextricably mingled and confused that the sounds at a little distance might have proceeded from a menagerie full of monkeys or a swarm of chattering magpies in a wood.

Among the rest, seated at the end of one of the long tables—the lowly places of the newly arrived—was a small party of English, unmistakable islanders ; mother, son, and daughter, under the especial care of another, a good-looking, well-preserved, evidently military man, not exactly young, but hardly arrived yet at middle age.

The family party was that of the Lezaires : the mother, widow of Sir Percy Lezaire, a baronet of Thorpeshire, not long deceased ; her only son, Sir Carysfort, a boy barely in his teens ; and her only daughter, Rachel, a sweet artless maiden, budding already into womanhood.

Their friend and cicerone was Colonel St. Evelyn, an acquaintance of not long standing, who had owed his first introduction to the timely succour he had afforded Miss Lezaire that season when in trouble with a runaway horse in the Row. Since then the acquaintance had developed rapidly, quite into intimacy, which was still further fostered and encouraged by the sociable free and easy life of a French watering-place.

Colonel St. Evelyn was a man of the world ; he had seen much of it, and knew France, including Paris, particularly well.

Lady Lezaire found him a most delightful companion. Now, at dinner, he pointed out all the celebrities at table.

"That rather matronly lady, with the pretty childlike face ? Madame Pornic—you must have heard of her—one of the cleverest actresses on the French stage, noted for her childlike innocence of manner—you can see it for yourself—ah ! gives immense piquancy"—here the Colonel lowered his voice to a whisper, which only reached Lady Lezaire—"to the most *risque* speeches. Proper ? Of course, otherwise I should not have pointed her out to you."

"Who is that tall graceful woman there ? How aristocratic she looks ! One of the old *noblesse* ?"

"Not quite. That is Madame Josse : her husband is the proprietor of the Grand Rabais, the great *magasins*, you know, in the Rue du Lac. He's enormously rich !"

"And, as usual, married rank ?"

"Not at all. She was one of his *vendeuses*, a saleswoman, who had the good sense to play for the biggest stake. It furnished the plot for one of Zola's most successful novels—'Mademoiselle Ernestine'—you should read it."

"If you recommend it, I am sure it must be nice," said Lady Lezaire; "but I am a little afraid of French novels."

"I like French puddings," put in Sir Carysfort, his mouth full of a *parfait à la crème*.

"And I everything French," added Rachel, who was radiant with happiness. It was quite clear that she had looked forward to meeting St. Evelyn, and was delighted that all had happened as she wished. Already one or two little tender asides had assured her of the interest that Colonel St. Evelyn took in her, and consoled her for the marked attention he was paying mamma.

For Colonel St. Evelyn, like an old campaigner, was establishing himself firmly at the base of operations. He knew that if he was to win the daughter, he must first get the mother on his side, and he saw no better means of attaining this than by throwing himself at Lady Lazaire's feet.

Her ladyship, vain and self-satisfied, was rejoiced at the impression she had made. Colonel St. Evelyn was a man of taste, who could appreciate her matronly common-sense, and see beauty in her mature charms. She accepted his attentions with cordial approval, and was already on the best terms with him.

They spent nearly all day together; in the evening Colonel St. Evelyn took them to the Casino, where they sauntered through the gardens under the moonlight, or lingered in one of the *kiosques*, where the game of race-horses, the popular *petits chevaux* of every seaside place, was in full swing, and where young Carysfort rapidly developed a passion for play. He backed the little horses wildly, and at first lost a considerable sum. Lady Lezaire's purse was, of course, at his service, and Colonel St. Evelyn's experienced advice. Then luck turned, and the young baronet's pockets were rapidly filled.

"If Hubert were only here!" cried Carysfort, his eyes dancing with excitement and greed.

"And who is Hubert?" asked St. Evelyn.

"A poor lad who lives with us at the Hall," replied Lady Lezaire. "He was a *protege* of my poor dear husband's, who adopted him when deserted by his parents. They had been in his service, you know, and now Carysfort has taken such a fancy to him that at home they are never apart. I must say he is devoted to my dear boy in return."

There was something in Rachel's face, which Colonel St. Evelyn watched constantly, that led him to suppose that Hubert was no favorite of hers. Anxious to know all he could of his new friends and their surroundings, he took the first opportunity of questioning Rachel about this "Hubert." It was when they had entered the great ball-room of the Casino, and he had persuaded her to take a turn in a waltz.

"You do not seem to care much for Hubert, whoever he may be," he said, coaxingly. "He is very much to be pitied, I think."

"I am sure you would not like him either," replied Rachel, blushing.

ing at the implicit compliment. "A common, ill-bred young man, not a fit companion for Carysfort. It is a great pity they are so much together."

"Does your brother go to Eton, or Harrow, or where?"

"Nowhere. He ought to go to school, don't you think? I have always said so, but mother will not listen to me. As it is, he learns nothing, and is always in the stables or the gun-room, hunting, shooting, or fishing, always with Hubert, and perpetually getting into mischief and bad ways."

"What a sensible little woman you are, Miss Lezaire! I wish you would give me advice sometimes."

"You would not take it, perhaps, like mamma," replied Rachel, archly.

"Only try me," said St. Evelyn, earnestly. "You cannot believe, I cannot well express to you, the deep value I attach to every word you say."

Rachel looked up at him shyly for one moment, then dropped her eyes quickly. There was a meaning in his great dark eyes, fixed on her with passionate regard, which she could not understand.

Little Rachel was more than half fascinated already.

Lady Lezaire could hardly condescend to be jealous of her daughter, nor did she suspect as yet that any flirtation was in progress between Rachel and Colonel St. Evelyn. But she had the woman's instinct that guesses a rival almost intuitively, and she could not refrain from passing a little unkindly criticism even on her own daughter.

"Children are a great deal of trouble to me," she said next day to the Colonel.

"They want a firm, strong hand," replied the Colonel, sympathetically; "now your boy——"

"Oh! it is not dear Carysfort I am complaining of. Darling child! he never gives me a moment's anxiety."

She forgot that at that moment the dear child was in physic, French being having already rendered medical treatment necessary.

"I was thinking of my daughter; a girl like that is a great responsibility."

"Surely she will relieve you of it ere long. Miss Lezaire is so charming that she ought to marry soon and well."

"That little chit! Don't speak of it. Why, she is barely out of the schoolroom. So *gauche*, too, so awkward, so utterly unformed, that I fear no one will be taken with her."

"Pinafores and bread-and-butter are not every one's taste, certainly," said the deceitful Colonel. "Very young girls are most insipid, I must confess."

"Rachel is a child, a perfect child, in mind as well as in appearance. It will be years before she is marriageable—long after she comes of age, I expect."

"Miss Lezaire is still a long way off coming of age, I should think," remarked the Colonel carelessly.

"Certainly; two or three years or more. Not but what she won't be her own mistress before she is twenty-one."

St. Evelyn pricked up his ears.

"Her father," went on Lady Lezaire, "very unwisely, I think, and without consulting me, left it in his will that she should have her portion directly she married."

"With your consent of course?"

"My daughter would not be likely to marry without it," said Lady Lezaire evasively, and in a cold, constrained tone of voice. "But I hope she will not think of anything of the kind for some time to come. I quite dread it, I assure you."

"The responsibility is of course very great," said Colonel St. Evelyn, seriously. "It is almost too much for a woman to bear alone.

"I feel it so, indeed; the burden presses me sorely at times."

"I should like—" St. Evelyn paused, and Lady Lezaire looked down, seemingly expecting some tender confessions. "I should like," he went on—"I mean if at any time I can be of the least service to you; if my poor advice, my humble efforts, can save you from trouble and annoyance, dear Lady Lezaire, I beg of you to dispose of me as you please. You can count on my devotion; pray believe that."

"I do, most willingly and entirely; you would act as a true friend, I am sure." And Lady Lezaire gave him the hand, which he kissed with respectful homage, as though binding himself to obey her lightest behest.

CHAPTER III.

CARYSFORT'S GUARDIAN.

THEY were a very friendly and merry party in those days at Trouville. Colonel St. Evelyn devoted himself entirely to the Lezaires, making himself acceptable to each in turn. Carysfort thought him an "A-1 chap." The Colonel took him to bathe every morning, and taught him to swim and tread water, and take headers off the splash-board into the great rolling waves that came in from the Atlantic when the sea was rough. They went off together on long fishing expeditions, carrying great prawn-nets, round the point towards Villerville, with their trousers tucked up above their knees. Every evening at the Casino, St Evelyn helped the boy to bet upon the race-game, and rather pandered to his propensity for play.

These constant attentions to her beloved boy would have been enough to have won Lady Lezaire's heart, but the Colonel made more direct attacks upon her. He kept himself always at her disposal; was ever ready to parade the plank-walks of Trouville when rank and fashion came out to sun themselves upon the beach; or was content to sit for hours by her chair on the sands, amusing her with gossip from London or Paris. He was always gay, always

amusing, invariably deferential; yet he took care to invest the commonest phrases with a tenderness that implied the deepest admiration, tempered with unbounded respect.

Little Rachel, however, was the happiest of the whole party. Publicly, although always studiously polite, St. Evelyn took no particular notice of her; only when they were alone together—and they had many opportunities for pleasant little *tete-a-tetes*—he made up for his coldness, and pressed his suit with all the vigor of a younger man. They met for a moment or two in retired corners of the various saloons of the hotel, or on the balcony under the moonlight when Lady Lezaire had gone up-stairs; or more often still, at the Casino dances, where it seemed quite natural that St. Evelyn should take her for his partner, seeing that there was no one else there she knew. After the first day or two, Rachel and St. Evelyn quite understood each other; her heart, innocent, guileless, and trustful, had gone straight out to this the first man who had told her that he loved her. No wonder that Rachel Lezaire was so blithe and joyous at Trouville.

St. Evelyn had not yet considered how best to obtain Lady Lezaire's consent and approval. He was content for the moment with the knowledge that he had succeeded with Rachel, the first and principal end after all. If she were only staunch and loyal to him, as he had every reason to hope, he felt confident that her mother might be won over in the end. But it would be wisest and best to watch and wait, to feel his way carefully, and make the most of any circumstances or opportunities that might turn up in his favor. Meanwhile he made Rachel promise to whisper no word of their engagement to her mother or any one else.

In the third week of their stay at Trouville there came news at which Lady Lezaire was greatly upset.

"Mr. Pendergast is dead," said Lady Lezaire, coming down on the sands after breakfast to where Rachel sat with Carysfort and Colonel St. Evelyn.

"Poor dear old man!" exclaimed Rachel.

"I don't care," said Carysfort, in the same breath. "I hated him."

"For shame, Carysfort! Don't say such things. But it is most perplexing. I did not like him much, I confess; he was never nice to Carysfort; still he did his best, and it will be difficult to replace him."

"What shall you do, mother? Whom shall you get?" asked Rachel.

"I can't think, I can't talk about it"—and Lady Lezaire stood there in evident perturbation—now reading for the twentieth time a black-edged letter she held in her hand, now looking askance at St. Evelyn.

"I fear I am *de trop*," said the Colonel, getting up from his chair; "you want to discuss family affairs. I will go for a walk and rejoin you by-and-by."

"No, no, Colonel St. Evelyn, do not leave us. We shall, perhaps, be glad of your advice."

"It is heartily at your service, dear Lady Lezaire, as I often told you before."

"I have just heard of the death of Mr. Pendergast, Carysfort's guardian."

"I hated him," said the boy again—"cross-grained old beast! He wanted to send me to school."

"Do be quiet, Carysfort; it is quiet too dreadful to hear you. Mr. Pendergast was not all that could be desired, perhaps, but he did his duty, I believe, honestly and well. I only wish I knew where to find a successor."

"Oh, Colonel! won't you be my guardian?" cried Carysfort, impulsively. "That would be jolly, and you could come and stay with us at the Hall."

"You foolish boy!" said St. Evelyn, laughing pleasantly, "you must not get such silly notions into your head."

"Why not?" observed Lady Lezaire, gravely, more in answer to her own thoughts than to anything that had been said.

"If I can help you, dear lady, in any difficulty," began St. Evelyn; but he saw that Lady Lezaire, pondering deeply, and communing with herself, was not listening, so he wisely forbore to recommend himself further.

Rachel, whose heart had fluttered wildly at Carysfort's suggestion, which opened up a substantial hope that St. Evelyn's suit might yet prove acceptable, said nothing. But there was a tell-tale blush on her cheek and a glad light in her eyes, which showed how eagerly she welcomed the idea of her lover's appointment as guardian. It meant his admission into the family, and the speedy removal of any obstacles to their marriage.

Nothing more was said on the subject just then; but Lady Lezaire returned to it that evening as she and Colonel St. Evelyn paced the Casino gardens alone.

"May I talk business for a moment, Colonel St. Evelyn?" she began. "I have been distracted with doubt all day, hesitating and uncertain as to the right thing to do; but at last I have made up my mind—will you accept the guardianship of my boy?"

"Oh, Lady Lezaire!"

"It is a great deal to ask of you I know; the burden will be great, the responsibility heavy."

"I am not afraid of that, believe me."

"Carysfort's fortune is large, his minority must last for eight years more, and a long and onerous stewardship would be imposed upon you."

"I am ready to accept the trust, if you think me worthy of it. I can only promise to do my best."

"Of that I have not the slightest doubt; I think I can rely upon your loyalty and devotion; my son's best interests will be safe in your hands."

"Dear Lady Lezaire, you overwhelm me; how shall I express my deep gratitude for your good opinion? I am touched, deeply touched, by it; it encourages me to hope that ere long some nearer and dearer tie—"

"Do not talk like that, please," interrupted Lady Lezaire, whose vanity led her to misunderstand his words; but just at this moment when anxiously concerned with her son's immediate future, the image of her dead husband occupied all her mind, and she could not tolerate addresses, for so she construed St. Evelyn's language, from another man. "Let us think only of Carysfort to-night; by-and-by, perhaps—"

"Then you do not forbid me to hope?" said Colonel St. Evelyn, taking her hand.

"I can't say—you must wait—we will see," said Lady Lezaire, greatly embarrassed, still satisfied that St. Evelyn was thinking of her.

Did the astute Colonel see her mistake? It could hardly be otherwise—her agitation, her confidences, must have told him that she took to herself the tender pleading that he meant for Rachel Lezaire. Yet he did not undeceive her, as he ought clearly to have done; but he feared Lady Lezaire's righteous indignation when she found herself disdained, and felt that it would lose him both the guardianship and all hope of winning Rachel's hand.

"It shall be as you wish," said St. Evelyn. "What I have to say to you, dear Lady Lezaire, although of the deepest importance to me and my happiness in life, will keep for another time. We will stick to business to-night, if you wish."

"That will be better," said Lady Lezaire, with a little coquettish laugh. "Business first, pleasure afterwards. There is a great deal to talk over, if you are to take the management of Carysfort's affairs."

"There is my hand on it," said St. Evelyn, gravely; and after that an hour or more were fully occupied with business details.

CHAPTER IV.

IN LINCOLN'S INN.

MR. PENDERGAST's death, and the appointment of a new guardian, shortened the visit to Trouville, and necessitated a speedy return to town. The Lezaires occupied their house in Connaught Place, and the Colonel went back to his lodging in Bury Street. It was now the early autumn, and his club was closed for cleaning; but for the first time since he lived at it, St. Evelyn was independent of the "Battle-axe and Banner." There was always a knife and fork ready for him in Connaught place, and it was an "uncommon snug house to hang up your hat in," as he complacently told his friends.

Lady Lezaire, directly she returned to town, informed the family lawyers, Messrs. Harvey & Tinson, of the selection she had made of a new guardian.

"Have you known this Colonel St. Evelyn long? The name is familiar to me," said Mr. Tinson, who was now the principal partner in the firm; an attorney of the spruce man-of-the-world type, who prided himself upon his insight into fashionable life, and his acquaintance with every one of the West End.

"He is a distinguished military officer," began Lady Lezaire, "and belongs to the 'Battle-axe and Banner.'"

"I thought I knew him; a bold black-faced man, quite middle-aged, with a well-preserved figure."

"Not more than forty at most," interrupted Lady Lezaire.

"Dyes, I should say, and probably wears stays."

"What can his appearance have to do with his appointment as guardian?" again interrupted Lady Lezaire, this time with some spirit.

"Not much, of course," said the lawyer, looking keenly at his client; "he is a most engaging agreeable person, no doubt, and you of course are perfectly satisfied as to his character and qualifications for so important a trust."

"He is a gentleman; honorable——" Mr. Tinson looked at her and nodded enigmatically; it might have been approval, or a suspicious distrust; "straightforward"—another nod; "well to do, with proper feelings, and very sensible ideas."

Mr. Tinson, who had nodded at each adjective, now asked, "In business, or matrimonially?"

"How can you hint at such a thing!" exclaimed Lady Lezaire, indignantly.

"I would not presume for one moment to force your ladyship's confidence, and you will forgive me if I am wrong. But this somewhat sudden choice of a man whom six months ago you did not know—am I not right?—indicates peculiar grounds for your preference."

The lawyer again looked keenly at Lady Lezaire, who colored slightly and cast down her eyes.

"Mr. Tinson," she went on, after an awful pause, "you presume rather upon your position as solicitor to the Lezaires. I did not come here to consult you on any matter private and personal to myself, but to inform you of my appointment of a new guardian to my son."

"And I should be wanting in my duty, Lady Lezaire, if I did not tell you what I knew about him."

"You know nothing against Colonel St. Evelyn. I am sure."

"I only know that he is to be seen at every race meeting. If you want Sir Carysfort to be brought up with a fine taste for racing—he is already very fond of horses, I believe—you can't do better than put him in Colonel St. Evelyn's hands. The Colonel bets largely, I believe, and not always with success."

Lady Lezaire winced a little as she remembered Carysfort's rapidly developed passion for the race-game at Trouville, under the Colonel's kindly tuition ; but she was staunch to her new friend.

"Colonel St. Evelyn is not the only gentleman who amuses himself on the turf. I have no fears of his doing Carysfort any harm."

Mr. Tinson waved his hands, as though washing them of all responsibility.

"If your ladyship is determined," he said, "there is nothing further for me to say. By the provisions of the late baronet's will, the choice of a guardian is left in your hands should a vacancy occur ; and you have decided, of course after ample consideration, to take Colonel St. Evelyn 'for better, for worse.'"

The application of this phrase from the marriage service annoyed Lady Lezaire.

"Mr. Tinson," she said, "you forget yourself. Your remarks border on impertinence."

"I am sure I meant no harm"—there was a shade of mockery in this apology—"but now if you will favor me with your instructions, I shall be happy to carry them out."

Lady Lezaire, in a few brief words, ordered the necessary deeds to be prepared for the appointment of Colonel St. Evelyn, and then, with an air of dignified reserve, she bade Mr. Tinson good morning.

"Well, of all the old fools," said Mr. Tinson to himself, when he was alone, commend me to a middle-aged widow who wants to marry again. She can know little or nothing of this man. He is no better than a needy fortune-hunter, addicted to gambling and heaven knows what else, yet she is ready to put herself and her son entirely in his hands. If she takes this Colonel St. Evelyn for a husband, she will repent it to the day of her death."

A few days later, when the deeds had been prepared, St. Evelyn called on Mr. Tinson to sign them, and to be put in possession of the particulars of his new trust.

There was not much cordiality in Mr. Tinson's reception ; he was stiff and distant in his manner, inclining to be reticent and uncommunicative. The Colonel, who was cool and off-hand, talked pleasantly, but in rather a patronizing way, as a man who was master of the position.

"I should be glad to know," he said, "the exact amount of responsibility I incur."

"It is a heavy one," remarked Mr. Tinson, gravely ; "the law is very strict with trustees and guardians."

Colonel St. Evelyn would not take offence. "The law is not likely to fall foul of me ; I have a wholesome horror of it and those who practice it."

"Thank you," said Mr. Tinson.

"Present company always excepted, of course," laughed St. Evelyn ; "but perhaps we had better get on. The income from the Lezaire estates is large ?"

"Upwards of £20,000 a year," said Mr. Tinson, stiffly.

"Of which I understand barely half is allowed for maintenance, the balance to accumulate during the minority? How, and by whom, are the accumulations to be invested?"

"By the guardian; but only in securities prescribed by the will."

"I shall see the will of course?"

"If you insist; but is it necessary? I have noted here all the provisions that deal with the trust. You can hardly want to see the will."

"But I do. It is part my duty. I hate to be in the dark. What nonsense, man!" he went on, in a more peremptory tone, seeing that the lawyer still hesitated; "can't I read the will for a shilling if I go to Doctors' Commons?"

"There is the will; you can read it here," said Mr. Tinson.

St. Evelyn took up the great parchment with its ponderous seals, and unfolding it, sat himself down to read leisurely. Now and again he made brief notes in a memorandum-book which he took from his pocket, and occasionally he addressed a few words of enquiry, seeking explanation of Mr. Tinson.

"Thank you," he said at length, "I think I have mastered its contents; now I should like to run through the figures of the sums that have already accrued from savings over expenditure, so as to verify their investment according to the will."

"By all means, if you think it necessary; but your demand implies a certain mistrust."

"Not at all," said St. Evelyn, blandly; "but it is right that, before assuming the trust, I should satisfy myself that everything is regular, and according to the conditions laid down."

"Here is a list of all the investments," said Mr. Tinson, without further protest, "and this bundle contains the various share certificates. They are all railway scrip and debentures, except the £17,000 in Canadian 4 per cent."

"Quite right," said St. Evelyn, after a minute examination of the various documents; "now we will just go into the leases of the Stradllethorpe farms, as well as the London house property. I should be glad to know how they are held, when any are likely to fall in, and the chances of improving our letting."

Another half-hour was devoted to the reviewing of these the principal sources of the Lezaire revenue.

"It seems all quite satisfactory," said the Colonel, whose memorandum-book had been in constant requisition throughout; "I only trust I shall discharge my stewardship equally well; my predecessor was evidently a thoroughly good man of business."

"Mr. Prendergast always acted under our advice," said Mr. Tinson, somewhat angrily, and with the air of a man claiming honor where honor was due.

"I shall be equally ready to avail myself of it," replied the Colonel blandly, "although that will depend naturally on how far I am satisfied with your conduct in our affairs."

"Harvey & Tinson have been solicitors to the Lezaires for gen-

erations," observed the lawyer, with rising indignation ; "our best and most loyal endeavors have always been at the disposal of our clients. You, a comparatively new trustee and a perfect stranger to us, can hardly contemplate the severance of relations that have extended over more than a century."

"Pardon me, my good sir, it has always been my rule in life to take people as I find them ; if you serve us faithfully, well and good ; if not, I shall advise my ward and Lady Lezaire to put their business in other hands."

"I consider such threats most unjustifiable !" cried Mr. Tinson, hotly.

"Don't lose your temper, my good sir. I am perfectly satisfied with you at present, and hope, for your sake, I shall always continue so. But enough said ; our business is ended for the present, I think, and I will bid you good day."

"Insolent, overbearing, hectoring, swaggering brute !" These were the epithets which Mr. Tinson hurled after his departing client. "To dare to threaten me ; to question our capabilities, and hint, rascally interloper, at breaking up the old connection with the firm ! I will be even with him yet ; I will keep my eye on him ; he shall be held strictly to account for his stewardship ; and, after all, it can't last more than half-a-lozen years or so. But the fellow's no fool, that's very clear. He has a very shrewd notion of business, and if he runs straight, will do well by the Lezaire estates. But does he mean to run straight ? I wonder what his next move will be."

CHAPTER V.

LADY LEZAIRE GIVES WAY.

COLONEL ST. EVELYN walked back from Lincoln's Inn Fields to his club, where he lunched with good appetite and well. They were proud of their mid-day buffet at the "Battle-axe," and its members declared it to be the best luncheon club in London. St. Evelyn, who had a sharp eye to the *cuisine*, knew what to choose, and the *truite au bleu*, the *chaud froid* of pheasant, and the cunningly prepared Russian salad, washed down by an imperial pint of sound Chambertin, fortified him admirably for the next job before him.

Lighting a full-flavored Reina, he set out westward, walking slowly and thoughtfully to Connaught Place.

"Her ladyship at home?" he asked the butler—an aged retainer, who sniffed a new master already, and was most obsequious to the coming king.

"No, Colonel. She 'ave gone with Sir Carysfort to give the dogs a run in the Park. But Miss Rachel's in the boodwarr."

St. Evelyn took the flight of stairs to the half landing in three steps, and the next minute had his little lady-love in his arms.

"Oh, Ferdy, how you startled me! it's far too bad"—but there was no ill-temper in the blithe young voice—"no, really, you mustn't again."

"I have such good news, my pretty bird. I must show my delight," and he kissed her again and again.

"But now, Ferdy, be reasonable, do. Tell me exactly what has happened. Sit down, there; yes, there"—she insisted on his taking a seat by the fire, which she kept on a sofa far away.

"Well, I have seen Mr. Tinson to-day, and signed the deeds. So has Lady Lezaire, and, now the whole thing is settled and finished, there is no reason why I should not speak to her about—you know."

"When shall you do it, Ferdy? Not to day? I feel so frightened. Suppose mamma should say No."

"She can't; I mean it won't much matter if she does."

"It would make me miserable not to have her consent. I could not go against her, Ferdy, never."

"But if she is obstinate—mamas have been so before now. What if she should object to me, should decline altogether to entertain my suit? Would you too send me away?"

Rachel hung her head.

"I could not bear to part with you, Ferdinand, not for ever," she said at length, in a low sweet voice.

"My pet! you will never give me up, I feel sure—my sweetest, best-beloved child! What have I done to deserve the priceless treasure of your love!" cried St. Evelyn, in tones that were rather theatrical, perhaps, but which conveyed no sense of their insincerity to her.

"Yes, Ferdinand, you may trust me indeed. I shall always be constant and true. I have given you my whole heart."

"Bless you, bless you for these dear words!" St. Evelyn would no longer be denied, but crossed quickly to the sofa, where he again clasped her to his arms.

Sad that there should be an abrupt termination to so pretty a scene, but a harsh hoarse voice now fell suddenly upon their surprised ears. It was Lady Lezaire's: she had entered the room unobserved.

"What is the meaning of this?" she hissed out, almost beside herself. Rage, disappointment, wounded vanity, combined to make Lady Lezaire very terrible just then.

"It means that Miss Rachel Lezaire has promised to become my wife," said St. Evelyn, in a cold, hard, determined tone.

"Never! It shall never be!" cried Lady Lezaire, now livid with passion. "But I will speak to you directly. As for you, shameless minx, go to your room this instant, and stay there. Do not presume, do not dare, to show yourself till I send for you. Go, miss, go!"

She then turned upon St. Evelyn.

"And you—you call yourself a gentleman. False, perjured, deceitful villain! is it thus you repay my kindness, my, my——"

"Really, Lady Lezaire, I am utterly at a loss to understand.

"How have I offended you so grievously?" asked St. Evelyn with perfect self-possession.

"Did you not ask me—— Faugh! I cannot bring myself to utter the words. I cannot express my loathing, my contempt for myself."

"I am sure you are under some grave misapprehension, Lady Lezaire. If I can offer you any reparation, any apology, I am more than ready to do so. But you are mistaken—you are, I assure you."

"Have you forgotten that evening at Trouville, when you gave me to understand that, that—— But no, it is too humiliating; I will not condescend to upbraid you."

"I repeat, you are altogether mistaken. What I said that evening I remember perfectly every word. But I was referring to Miss Lezaire, to whom even then I was deeply, passionately attached. I would have asked you formally for her hand that night, but you checked me. I do so now."

"My answer is ready for you: you shall not marry Rachel Lezaire. I will never, never give my consent."

"Is it needed?" asked St. Evelyn, coolly.

Lady Lezaire looked at him in astonishment.

"Miss Lezaire is independent of you by her father's will."

"How do you know that?" asked Lady Lezaire, quickly.

"I had the will in my hands an hour or two ago at Mr. Tinson's"

"I had forgotten, weak fool that I was, to put you in that position; but it shall be undone. I will not permit you to continue as Carysfort's guardian; my confidence in you is gone."

"I have no desire to occupy that position if I am no longer acceptable to you. I will give up the guardianship at once, but I will not surrender my claim to Miss Lezaire: we understand each other, and are both of one mind on this point."

"She is a silly foolish girl whom you have bewitched and beguiled. But she shall know you at your true worth before the day is out, and shall send you about your business herself."

"I will take a refusal from no other lips but hers. I have no fears, Lady Lezaire; Rachel is as true as steel."

"She does not know her own mind yet."

"Nor you mine. I am resolved, firmly resolved, to make her my wife, and what I say I'll do; you can't turn me aside from my purpose, nor, I think, will you succeed in depriving me of Rachel's affections: we can wait——"

"Can you! Not long then: why, already you are old enough to be her father," interrupted Lady Lezaire, with a bitter laugh.

"I may remind you of the old proverb, replied the Colonel, imperturbably; "a man, you know, is as old as he feels, a woman as old as she looks: and believe me, dear Lady Lezaire, you might be Rachel's grandmother. Why vex and trouble yourself so! it only ages people prematurely."

"I declare, sir, your insolence passes all bounds. It would show better feeling, after what has occurred, if you were to withdraw from this house, in which you are no longer welcome."

Colonel St. Evelyn rose from his chair and held out his hand.
"Come, Lady Lezaire, be more reasonable. I am grieved, deeply grieved at this misunderstanding, but I do not think I am to blame. Just consider. I was taken with Rachel from the very first, from that day that I stopped her horse in the Park; then I found that she cared for me a little, and you yourself were always so encouraging and kind."

"I gave you no encouragement; it is untrue, monstrously untrue!"

"You allowed me to be constantly with her, to pay her marked attention—"

"You never did pay her any attention that I saw; that's what I complain of."

"You see I am not very demonstrative, Lady Lezaire; but I was in love in my own quiet way, and then you yourself gave me so many marks of your kindly approval—"

"I? How? In what way?"

"Did you not offer of your own accord to make me your son's guardian? An honor quite unsolicited by me; I only accepted because I thought I was doing you a service, and because I thought your boy liked me."

He was still standing opposite her as he stated his own case, with an able, masterly kind of advocacy that was having its effect.

"Come, Lady Lezaire," he repeated, "let us be friends; won't you give me your hand?"

"You have behaved very badly to me, Colonel St. Evelyn, that you must be ready to allow; I cannot forgive and forget in a moment, nor shall I ever recover my confidence in you."

There was less acrimony in her tone, although she still seemed obdurate and angry.

"I am ready to make all the *amende* in my power. You shall find in me a most attached and devoted friend; I will labor strenuously in your son's interests, and protect them as my own. As for Rachel, her happiness shall be my first care; mine, I assure you, is wrapped up in this match. I am no longer in my first youth, and I can never love another girl in the same way. Do not, I implore you, refuse me her hand."

"I can't turn round all in a moment; it has been so sudden, such a surprise, I am so bitterly disappointed—" she would have said, but the admission was too bitter for her *amour propre*—"so disgusted," she went on, "at the deceit, the secrecy, that I hardly know what to say."

But St. Evelyn took his leave in a sanguine state of mind; he flattered himself that Lady Lezaire's bitter opposition was overcome, and that with a little persistence he would win Rachel's hand with Lady Lezaire's full approval and without sacrificing his new position as guardian of her son.

So it came to pass; Lady Lezaire held out obstinately for a week or two longer, but she yielded at length to St. Evelyn's unwearied attacks, and Rachel's pathetic entreaties, although the latter she

never entirely forgave. She was not a little influenced in her decision by the fear of Mr. Tinson's ridicule, who would have shrewdly guessed the reason had St. Evelyn's appointment as guardian been cancelled. They were married that autumn, and Mr. Tinson apologized for his suspicions when he found that it was Rachel and not her mother he was in eagerness to marry; nor could he either deny that St. Evelyn had behaved well, for the Colonel had declined to have anything to say to settlements, and declared that every penny of Rachel's money should be absolutely tied up on herself.

The marriage came off without unnecessary delay, from Connaught Place, and the happy couple went abroad for a short honeymoon, intending to return and spend the rest of the winter at the Hall.

CHAPTER VI.

ARRIVALS AT THE HALL.

LADY LEZAIRE had several letters from Rachel, and was kept well informed of the movements of the newly married couple. No precise invitation had been issued to the St. Evelyns, but it was understood that directly they returned to England they were to come down on a long visit to the Hall.

Their arrival was heralded by the appearance of Gibbings, the Colonel's man, who brought down the *impedimenta*; heavy baggage, guns, dogs, and horses. Of the latter there was a string. The Colonel was a hard rider when he got the chance, and the first use he had made of the funds marriage had put at his disposal was the purchase of four sound serviceable animals, full of bone and sinew, well calculated to carry him forward with the Thorpeshire Hunt.

The Lezaire coachman, a grey-haired, cross-grained servitor, who had long been master of the horse in the limited establishment kept up by Lady Lezaire after her husband's death, sent in his duty and begged her ladyship's commands with regard to the Colonel's stud.

"Where be I to put 'em, my lady?" he asked testily. He had found Gibbings a little too free and easy—too ready to make himself at home, and take possession of the best quarters.

"Surely there's room enough. We've only got the carriage-horses, and the ponies, and Sir Carysfort's cob."

"I thought of the six-stall stable in the clock-yard——" the oldest, darkest, and least satisfactory part of the Lezaire stables.

"Very well; that will give two stalls to spare."

"But the Colonel's man, he beant over well pleased. He says that the hunters cost money, and that they ought to be in loose boxes, and he wants the hunting stable."

This was a spacious addition made by Sir Percy Lezaire, when twenty years earlier he had hunted the Thorpe hounds.

"The Colonel's man will have to be satisfied with the accommodation provided," replied Lady Lezaire, angrily.

"Be the Colonel's horses likely to stand here long, my lady?"

"I cannot say; why do you ask?"

"Becos the six-stall stable's good enough for a few weeks; I should not like to keep valuable horses there all the winter."

"They'll not be here so long as that, Peters. Let them go into the six-stall stable. Those are my orders, tell the Colonel's man."

The coachman disposed of, the keeper came to know what was to be done with the Colonel's dogs. Three of them; they would disarrange the kennels. Sir Carysfort's setter would have to turn out. And, by the way, was it likely any of the coverts would be shot over the next week or two? The Colonel's man had sent two breech-loaders into the gun room, and had talked of a battue.

Lady Lezaire dismissed the keeper with a few brief words. Anger was in her heart against her son-in law.

"He wants to take entire possession of the Hall, I think. He quite forgets he is only my son's and my guest."

But Lady Lezaire had not done with the St. Evelyns.

Mrs. Leleu was the next to remind her of the importance of the expected visitors. She wished for instructions as to the rooms she should give the St. Evelyns.

"The blue suite in the south wing, I suppose?" suggested the housekeeper.

"Certainly not," said Lady Lezaire. "Why should they have the best rooms in the Hall?"

"I only thought that it was a special occasion —" the housekeeper explained.

"There is nothing special about it. I don't see why my daughter should not go back to her own room; but I suppose that would hardly do now that she is married."

"Shall I get the pink-and-white room ready then, my lady? the windows look into the rose garden, and the aspect is south-west."

"No; let them have the tapestry room. There is a dressing-room attached to it, and it is close to the back stairs leading to the gun-room,—that will probably suit Colonel St. Evelyn best."

The happy couple arrived as evening was drawing in. They were shown straight into the library, which was generally used at the Hall as a cosy snugger in preference to the great drawing-rooms, and here Lady Lezaire received them with as much warmth as she could muster. She kissed her daughter, and gave her hand to her son-in-law, but spoke no cordial words of welcome.

"Will you have tea at once, Rachel, or would you like to go to your room?"

"I think I should like to go to my room first. Where have you put us?"

"The tapestry room would, I thought, be most convenient."

Rachel's face fell rather, but all she said was, "I suppose, Ber-

tram" (this was her maid) "will be there with the things by this time. Come up, Ferdinand, by-and-by!"

"All right, my love," replied her gallant husband; "I should like first to see after the nags. I suppose my man has arrived?" This was to Lady Lezaire.

"Certainly; he came down yesterday with four horses and a whole pack of dogs."

"Gibbings is capital chap," said the Colonel, laughing pleasantly, and without seeming to notice any *arrire pensee* in Lady Lezaire's tone. "I suppose I shall easily find the stables?"

"One of the men will show you if you ring," said Lady Lezaire; and with that Colonel St. Evelyn took himself off.

"Ah! here you are," said a fresh voice cheerily, as St. Evelyn passed out into the courtyard. "I'm jolly glad to see you. How is Rachel?"

It was the young baronet, who was as usual loafing about the offices and the stable-yard.

Colonel St. Evelyn greeted him warmly.

"Carysfort, my boy, how goes it? Well met. Come along and see my horses. Do you know where they are put up?"

"Don't I just? I say, Colonel, it's a beastly shame,—they have given your horses the six-stall stable. Why, it's as damp as ditch-water, and a horse can't lie down in any of the stalls."

"Are you so pressed for room?"

"Room? There are not half-a-dozen horses in the whole place."

By this time they had reached the stables, where Gibbings was in waiting.

"Halloa, Gibbings! is this the best you could do for us?"

"It wasn't my fault, sir. Peters, the coachman, said he had my lady's orders that they were to come here. I told him we should want at least two loose boxes."

"Where is Peters? Send him here at once."

The cross-grained, surly old coachman came haltingly, but the first sound of the Colonel's voice made him jump.

"Show me round the stables, will you? I am not going to have my horses killed if I can help it. Get a lantern, or have the place lit up,"

St. Evelyn fixed at once, with unerring quickness, upon the hunting stable.

"What horses stand here generally?" he asked sharply.

"It was built for Sir Percy's hunters."

"And what is it used for now? What horses stand here, I ask you? Come, look sharp!"

"There beant none just at this moment, but ——"

"There will be in half an hour. Call some of the helpers, Gibbings, and bring my lot over here. I will come and see them bedded down myself by-and-by."

"I'm very glad you did that, Colonel," said Carysfort. "Peters is a cross-grained old beast; he thinks the whole place belongs to him, and mother always gives way."

"Of course it was all a mistake ; but you see, Carysfort, I have paid a good bit of money for those nags, so I'm bound to look after them."

St. Evelyn now went upstairs to rejoin his wife, and found there had been another mistake, to call it by no stronger name. Mrs. St. Evelyn was having a warm discussion with the housekeeper when the Colonel came in, and he was surprised to find his gentle little wife speaking in so determined a fashion.

"You know, Mrs. Leleu, I have always hated this room. I had rather have gone anywhere. It is so dark, and it looks into the courtyard."

"My lady chose it herself ; it is no fault of mine, Mrs. St. Evelyn."

"What's wrong, my love ?" asked the Colonel.

"Oh, nothing ; only I do so hate this room. Mother has forgotten, I think."

"We'll arrange that by-and-by—any place will do for to night."

"But you might have reminded her, Mrs. Leleu," went on Rachel, sticking to her point. "I am really very seriously put out!"

"There, there," said the Colonel, soothing his wife, "never mind now ; we'll soon put this right."

"I assure you it was not my fault," repeated the housekeeper, and she left the room.

A very civil-spoken, plausible sort of person, but with rather a fierce look on her sallow, still handsome face, and in her large, dark-brown eyes, a suspicion of temper easily aroused.

"Your mother does not appear to be particularly anxious to make us at home, my dear."

"Oh, don't say that, Ferdinand ; she is not really unkind, but she has never quite forgiven you, I think."

There were no secrets between husband and wife.

"I suppose that's it, but she might have been pleasanter on our first day at the Hall. Why, she ordered my horses into a tumble-down place not fit for cows ! But I soon made a change."

"Do you mean that you countermanded anything that mother had arranged ?"

"Yes, my dear, that is what I mean ; and to-morrow, if you will choose the rooms you prefer, I daresay your mother will give you them."

There was a set look about St. Evelyn's eyes as he made this remark, which showed that he intended to try conclusions with Lady Lezaire.

CHAPTER VII.

A FIRST PASSAGE OF ARMS.

THERE was no discussion or contest between Lady Lezaire and Colonel St. Evelyn till next morning. The first difference of opinion arose concerning Carysfort, and the future disposal of his time,

The Colonel had been studying the county map, and had discovered that the next meet of the Thorpe hounds was within very easy reach of the Hall.

"Would you like to go to Gerard's Cross?" (the meet) he asked Carysfort.

"Wouldn't I rather?" cried the boy, looking doubtfully at his mother.

"Dear Carysfort has never hunted," said Lady Lezaire, in a cold, forbidding manner. "The risks are so great, that I have never liked to trust him."

"But he must begin some day," expostulated St. Evelyn; "you cannot allow him to grow up without practice in the habits and customs of an English country gentleman."

"I have followed the hounds scores of times," cried Carysfort, "but only on foot with Hubert."

"Very *infra dig.* for the son of a M. F. H. But I suppose you can stick on a horse?"

"Can't I just?" replied the boy.

"And have you jumped a fence?"

Carysfort looked queerly at his mother before he replied—

"Dozens of times; my cob is 'A 1' at timber."

"He won't do for Gerard's Cross, though; you shall ride one of my lot. Sennacherib will carry you well; he is easy to steer, and has a light mouth."

"Carysfort shall not ride to hounds till he is eighteen," said Lady Lezaire, decisively. "I absolutely forbid it."

"Please, don't say that, Lady Lezaire," the Colonel pleaded. "It will be too late for him then to get confidence or a proper seat. I will take the greatest care of him."

"Oh yes, mother, I must go. You won't be so cruel. I'm big enough now. Why, it's as bad as about the shooting."

St. Evelyn looked as if he did not understand.

"Mother did not like Carysfort using firearms," explained Mrs. St. Evelyn.

"So she makes me have a safety-gun—a thing with a false hammer, which you have to put in before you fire. When a bird gets up I have to fumble in my waistcoat-pocket, or ask Hubert or the keeper for the hammer, and when I get it I have lost my shot."

"You might as well try putting salt on a bird's tail," said St. Evelyn, laughing heartily." "But all that can be easily mended."

"Never with my consent," put in Lady Lezaire, with increased severity. "I hate your having anything to do with guns. They are always going off."

"Which I might suggest is what they are intended for," said the Colonel.

"I mean going off unexpectedly. We hear constantly of such terrible accidents.

"Due to want of care, but more still to want of knowledge and experience. I am sure the very way to let Carysfort shoot himself himself"

"Heaven forbid!" cried the anxious mother.

"——or some one else, is to give him no chance of handling firearms. He should get accustomed to them at once."

"I have my own views as to the education of my son," said Lady Lezaire stiffly, intending to end the discussion—"and I want no one to give me advice or teach me my duty."

"You don't know boys, my dear Lady Lezaire, so well as I do." St. Evelyn laughed again, and good humoredly. "I am ready to back my plan against yours any day."

Lady Lezaire gave him a look of sour displeasure, but made no reply.

"Come, Carysfort, and look at the nags. You shall try Sennacherib, if you like, round the yard."

"You are a brick, Colonel—I like you," cried Carysfort; "and we'll have a talk with the keeper about the coverts. We might have a little pot-hunting, you and I, this afternoon."

"Carysfort, Mr. Lewisham" (a neighboring curate, who came daily to perform the thankless and unprofitable task of teaching the young baronet) will be here in half an hour," said Lady Lezaire. "Have you prepared for him?"

But Carysfort was already out of earshot, bounding round St. Evelyn like a dog just let loose from his chain.

They went out into the great courtyard, which was to the right of the drive and entrance to the Hall, and passed through this on their way to the stable-yards beyond. Suddenly Carysfort left St. Evelyn's side and ran off to slip his arm familiarly into that of another lad who was walking ahead of them.

St. Evelyn came up with the two boys at the doorway of the hunting stable. "This is Hubert," said Carysfort, by way of introduction.

"Oh!" remarked St. Evelyn, carelessly, but he bent his eyes keenly upon the new-comer.

A slouching, slipshod youth, older probably than he looked; there was a strong line of black down upon his upper lip, indicating that he might be three or four-and-twenty, even more, but his manner and appearance were those of sixteen. Round shoulders took from his height, which was about the medium; very small sharp features gave a childish look to a naturally small face. Straight, wiry-looking black hair straggled over a low projecting forehead, under which gleamed two black, shifty, restless little eyes, generally cast down, for their owner had a strong objection to look you in the face. His whole aspect—his loose, undecided gait, his shy, shrinking manner, his weak and constantly averted face, and his sullen and abrupt speech—was decidedly unprepossessing.

"Oh!" repeated St. Evelyn, "and what is Hubert's other name?"

"Hubert Podifat is my name," said the youth reluctantly, as though the admission was likely to do him harm.

"And pray, what do you do with yourself by daylight?" went on the Colonel.

Hubert Podifat hung his head, and looked stupidly stolid, as though he did not understand the question.

"Hubert is my particular friend," said Carysfort, answering for him. "We go about together, fishing, shooting, hunting, ratting,—any larks. Hubert's up to everything, I can tell you."

"Is he?" said the Colonel, with rather a sneer in his tone; "but that will do for Master Hubert. Come, Carysfort, and look at the horses. We will have a saddle put on Sennacherib, and then you can try him."

Hubert Podifat slunk away, but he remained in the far corner of the yard while Carysfort and Colonel St. Evelyn were together, and the moment St. Evelyn turned to go back to the house, he rejoined Carysfort with the eagerness of an inseparable friend.

The Colonel had been recalled by a message to the effect that Lady Lezaire wished to speak to him. He found her in the library with a flushed face. There was decided anger in her tone when she began. "Can it be possible, Colonel St. Evelyn, that what Peters, my coachman, tells me is true?" she said,—"that you have taken upon yourself to alter arrangements I had made, and moved your horses into other stables?"

"It is perfectly true," replied St. Evelyn, calmly.

"Then may I ask how you dared—"

St. Evelyn interrupted her.

"One moment, Lady Lezaire," said he. "Is it perhaps as well we should have an explanation. I should like to ask you at once whether you deliberately wished to put an affront upon me."

"I do not understand you."

"Has not your treatment of us since we arrived been an affront—or worse? We come here as your guests,—your own daughter, and I, your son's guardian as well as your own son-in-law,—and what do we find? Although the Hall is absolutely empty, you lodge us in the worst rooms in the house—"

"That is not the case," interrupted Lady Lezaire, hotly. "Rachel has been making mischief."

"Every one knows that the tapestry room, where you put us, is only used when the house is quite full; and you are well aware, Lady Lezaire, that the apartment is especially distasteful to my wife."

"I am mistress here, and I will put my guests where I choose," said Lady Lezaire.

"Quite so; but that does not remove the affront. Then as regards the stabling; there are no end of vacant stalls,—I saw them with my own eyes this morning,—yet you would have allowed my horses to run all sorts of risks in the very worst, the dampest, the darkest, and most unwholesome stable at the Hall."

"I never asked you to bring your horses down here."

"Pardon me! It was understood that I was to hunt, and I should never have presumed to look for mounts in your stables."

"You have taken a great liberty, I think, and I must insist that

you will not again interfere with any orders I may give," said Lady Lezaire, hoping that the argument might now end. But St. Evelyn had more to say.

"I should not dream of setting up my authority against yours, but I repeat that as Carysfort's guardian I am entitled to more consideration than I have received. It is very unpleasant to me to have to assert myself, but I feel that I am bound to do so if I am to take my proper place. I cannot look after your son's interests if I am to be treated as a mere cipher. You insist—so must I."

"What do you insist on?" asked Lady Lezaire, a little cowed by the masterful tone.

"On not being humiliated and made to appear small before all the servants and retainers. I have not come down here as a poor relation, to pick up the crumbs and be satisfied with any small scraps of civility that you may throw to me. I claim to be of some consequence at the Hall, and I repeat I must insist upon being so treated.

"It is quite a mistake to suppose that I wish to affront you," said Lady Lezaire, now quite crestfallen. "I am quite ready, I assure you, to do anything in my power to make your stay pleasant."

"Thank you extremely, Lady Lezaire. I will take you at your word. Perhaps you will tell the housekeeper to move us into the blue suite in the south wing; as to my horses, I have seen to them already."

Thus, in her first engagement with her son's guardian, Lady Lezaire had tried to stand to her guns, but had been utterly worsted in the fight.

CHAPTER VIII.

HUBERT'S PARENTAGE.

COLONEL ST. EVELYN was well received in the county. He came under the sponsorship, so to speak, of the Lezaires—a family long settled and much esteemed in Thorpeshire. Among the neighboring magnates, too, were a few whom St. Evelyn had met in London—either casual acquaintances of the racecourse, or fellow-members of his club, the "Battle-axe and Banner," with whom he was on something more than nodding terms. He got a good character in the county from the latter as a shrewd, sensible man of business, and this gained him the goodwill of the Lord Lieutenant, who at once placed him on the Commission of the Peace. St. Evelyn lost no time in appearing at sessions, and sat regularly on the bench; he freely offered himself for committees on jails, highways, lunatic asylums, anything and everything in which he might be useful, and his services were gladly accepted. He was soon known and

appreciated as an excellent county magistrate, practical, fairly well informed, and never afraid of hard work.

The popularity he speedily won was, however, more particularly traceable to his thoroughly sportsmanlike character. One of his first acts on arrival at the Hall was the transmission of a substantial cheque to the Master as his subscription to the hounds. This was followed by his appearance in the hunting field, admirably mounted and turned out, at the very first meet after he came down; and from that time he rode well to the front on every possible occasion.

They liked this in the county. The Thorpe hounds were a little too near to town, and the neighborhood was apt to be inundated by Londoners, who were often keener and better mounted than members of the hunt. Thus any one who, like St. Evelyn, was ready to maintain the sporting reputation of the resident gentry, was sure to be approved of.

Again, St. Evelyn, who by degrees had established an ascendancy over Lady Lezaire which she was powerless to resist, had arranged several shooting parties in the young baronet's name, at which the neighboring squires were made free of the Straddlethorpe coverts in a liberal fashion that had long been unknown.

St. Evelyn was generally voted a good sort of chap, a great improvement upon Sir Carysfort's last guardian, and a decided acquisition to the county.

Hospitalities were freely exchanged between Straddlethorpe and the houses around. The newly-married couple were invited everywhere, generally to dine and sleep, after the fashion of country neighborhoods, where it is a poor compliment to drag guests fifteen miles or more by cross-country roads to eat no better dinner than they could get at home.

On the other hand, Lady Lezaire was prevailed upon—although usual docile, she still resisted St. Evelyn's influence at times—to entertain in her turn. The Straddlethorpe guest-chambers were once more refilled, and the best wine in the cellar—the '59 Margaux and the '34 port, so highly esteemed by local connoisseurs—was freely displayed after dinner.

Lady Lezaire was not always at great pains to be gracious, but the people who came to the house were mostly friends of long standing, and she could not be rude to them, however much she disliked the person who really brought them there. After all, Colonel St. Evelyn, a self-possessed, experienced man of the world, was not likely to remain in the background, and the doing of the honours fell chiefly on him.

One day there was a large dinner-party at the Hall. The hounds had drawn blank that afternoon at no great distance from Straddlethorpe, and two or three men who were to stay at the Hall had ridden over there with St. Evelyn. Young Sir Carysfort was with them. On arriving at the stables, he had jumped off his horse and had run quickly across to where Hubert Podifat was standing, waiting for him, as it seemed. The boy slipped his arm into that of his friend, and they went off together in close confabulation.

"Who's that chap?" asked old Mr. Etherly—a hard-riding, red-faced country squire, who had lived all his life in the Thorpeshire country.

"A fellow called Hubert Podifat, or some such name," replied the Colonel. "I know nothing about him, except that he is far too thick with Carysfort Lezaire to please me."

"He's still hanging about here, then? how strange!"

"Who is he? Where does he come from? Do you know him?"

"Of course. Don't you? It was a great mistake, I always said, allowing him to run about the Hall. But Lezaire—Sir Percy, I mean—the last baronet, you know, always took his own way."

"But, my dear Mr. Etherly, you haven't told me who this Hubert Podifat is."

"That'll keep, Colonel. To night, in the smoking-room, you shall hear. This place is too public."

Late that night, when old Mr. Etherly had at least one bottle of '84 port under his belt, and was enveloped in the smoke of a full-flavored "partaga," St. Evelyn reminded him of his promise.

"Hubert Podifat," said Mr. Etherly, rolling his cigar round in his mouth, "is the putative son of Podifat, who was under-keeper here in Sir Percy's time."

"Putative? Who was his real father, then?"

"No one knows for certain. But I never had the smallest doubt that the honor belonged to Sir Percy Lezaire."

"Can it be possible! And the mother?"

"There was the mystery. No one ever saw her, or heard of her even. Sir Percy must have kept his *liaison* uncommonly close. When Podifat came to live at Straddlethorpe—he had the North Lodge—he was called a widower. He certainly brought no wife with him—only this one brat of a boy."

"Hubert?"

"Precisely. He was a rank blackguard, was Podifat, who had knocked up and down the world a great deal in his time—in America, Canada, everywhere—an idle, drunken, good-for-nothing rogue, who lounged in the alehouse all day, and was the secret ally of poachers by night. It was a wonder that Sir Percy put up with him for an hour. That was what raised suspicions, in fact."

"It was thought that the fellow had some hold over Sir Percy, I suppose?"

"Just so. You see Straddlethorpe in those days was as well managed a place as any in the shires, and Sir Percy would not have tolerated such a disreputable person as Podifat, not for an hour, if he had been able to help himself."

"But there must have been more reason than that for imputing the boy's parentage to Sir Percy."

"The notion was first put about, I believe, by the man Podifat. He was a garrulous, gossiping, scandalous scoundrel, and for a long time no one thought much of what he said. But the fellow was so persistent; his story never varied, and, to tell the truth, he spoke so plainly, that people began to think there was something in it."

"Particularly when taken in connection with Sir Percy's forbearance?"

"Exactly. Then something else cropped up to justify the first suspicions. Podifat went utterly to the bad. He was apprehended on a serious charge—night poaching complicated with manslaughter—and he left the country, not entirely of his own accord."

"As a convict, in fact?"

"As a convict; he was last heard of in Western Australia, but that was many years ago."

"Well?"

"The little brat—this Hubert, you know—was deserted, left to shift for himself. They found him half starved, a wretched little object, in the empty Lodge, and Sir Percy at once had him taken in at the Hall."

"Was Sir Percy married then?"

"To be sure, and bad been for some years. Rachel—Mrs. St. Evelyn, I mean—must have been four or five."

"And what did Lady Lezaire say to the appearance of Hubert?"

"Took it in excellent part, so we heard. Talked much of the kindness, the noble philanthropy of Sir Percy, and was quite kind to young Hubert."

"Do you suppose she knew the real state of the case?"

"People are generally the last to know what interests them most. Anyhow she made no objection. Hubert was taken charge of by the housekeeper ——"

"The present woman?"

"That I can't say, but I expect not,—it's so many years ago."

"And so the boy grew up at the Hall?"

"He became a kind of tame cat about the house—tolerated, but not much liked—until young Carysfort began to grow up. He took an enormous fancy to the fellow, and it was never checked. Lady Lezaire——" (he paused, wondering whether he ought to take St. Evelyn's mother-in-law to task) "ought not to have permitted it."

"I quite agree with you, my dear Mr. Etherly. But, on the contrary, she seems rather to have encouraged the intimacy."

"Hubert Podifat is hardly a proper associate for Sir Carysfort Lezaire," the old squire admitted frankly.

"I feel that most strongly, and this is the thing ought to be stopped."

"You won't find it easy, I expect."

"I'll do it, even if Hubert Podifat has to be sent away from the Hall. He is too old to be hanging about here, hand in glove with the head of the Lezaires."

"That's where you'll find the difficulty. Carysfort won't bear to part with him easily. However, I quite agree with you, Colonel, that the intimacy ought not to continue."

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT CAME OF A FIGHT.

COLONEL ST. EVELYN thought that by freely offering his companionship to young Carysfort Lezaire, he would keep Hubert Podifat at a distance, and perhaps break the intimacy. But it is seldom that a grown-up man can make himself the close friend and ally of a lad in his teens, and ere long the boy chafed at his guardian's attentions. Carysfort often tried and often succeeded in giving the Colonel the slip, and instead of joining him in some previously planned expedition, ran off to join Hubert Podifat, a more congenial associate.

One day St. Evelyn came complaining to his wife of Carysfort's sudden disappearance.

"We were going over to Theobalds to see the kennels, and lunch with Lord Prudhames. But now, at the last moment, Carysfort is not to be found. It's too aggravating," said the Colonel savagely.

"What can have become of him?" asked Rachel.

"He has gone off somewhere with that scamp, Hubert Podifat. Gibbings saw them together an hour ago."

"They have been friends for so long," pleaded Rachel.

"Hubert is a very bad friend, I am afraid. I'm sure I've tried to do all I can for Carysfort. I am always ready to go anywhere, to do anything with him."

"Boys like some one more their own age. Not that I think you old, dearest," she added, hastily.

"You have given me the best proof of that, my love, by taking me at the eleventh hour. But you must admit that Hubert is the worst possible companion for Carysfort."

"Of course; I have always said so."

"What I dread is some scandal. Hubert will lead your brother into mischief; they will get into trouble. But I'll find out what they're after to-day; of that I am determined," and he turned to the door.

"Are you going, Ferdinand?"

"I must ride over to Theobalds alone. We are expected to lunch, you know."

St. Evelyn, when riding, liked to be followed by a groom, and as often as not he took Gibbings, a humble but long-standing friend. The Colonel, while still on the Lezaire estate, was in the habit of dismounting to examine fences or drains, or to go into cottages and do a little bailiff's work on his own account. Gibbings was with him this day.

"What's become of Sir Carysfort?" asked St. Evelyn. "Have you any idea?"

"They went out Market Reepham way, Colonel. Up to some game."

"Have you any idea what?"

"I did hear there was to be a fight."

"A prize-fight?"

"Yes, Colonel. Some gypsies who have been hanging about these parts have matched one of their people against 'Burly Scrab,' the brewer's man, and it was to be fought out this afternoon behind a low public-house—'The Case is Altered,' they call it—just outside the town."

"Do you mean to tell me that Sir Carysfort Lezaire has been taken by this Hubert to such a disreputable affair?"

"I am not certain, of course, Colonel; but that's what they were saying at the Hall."

Colonel St. Evelyn determined to ride into Market Reepham from Theobalds, and under Gibbing's guidance he reached the public-house between four and five. The fight had come off in a paddock behind the house, and was over by the time the Colonel arrived. But most of the patrons of the nearly extinct science of self defence still lingered in the tap-room.

Dismounting, and leaving his horse to Gibbings, St. Evelyn walked straight in. A noisy and apparently quarrelsome company sat round the dirty, beer-stained tables, discussing the episodes of the recent encounter, and arguing over another expected event.

"I'd back the young master here," said one rough voice for a pot."

"Go along wi' you," retorted another; "tain't in nature that a slip or a chap like this should stand up with Long Pete."

"I'm not afraid of half-a-dozen Petes," put in a third voice, which St. Evelyn immediately recognized; "I'll fight him for the pleasure of the thing."

"You're a good-plucked un," cried several of the roughs.

"Put down the stakes and make a match," said a fresh voice—Hebert Podifat's.

But now St. Evelyn, pushing through the crowd, interposed.

"Carysfort! Can it be possible! You in this den and in this state!"

Lady Lezaire would not have been proud of her son had she seen him now. Carysfort was lounging on a bench, smoking a short clay pipe. In front of him was a quart-pot of ale, to which he had been paying close attention, as his flushed cheeks and dazed eyes proved.

"Fair words, master, fair words," put in the landlord of "The Case is Altered." "My house is as respectable——"

"We will see about that when the time comes for renewing your license. You don't know me, perhaps?"

"It's Colonel Bloke," whispered one of the roughs to a neighbor. St. Evelyn was already dreaded on the Thorpeshire bench.

"Come away from this disreputable place, Carysfort,—it's too disgraceful that you should have been brought here; but those who are responsible shall pay for it."

This was meant for Hubert, who sat scowling but apprehensive, like an ill-conditioned cur expecting a kick.

The young baronet got up reluctantly, and, hanging his head, followed his guardian out of the place. Gibbings gave him up his horse, Carysfort clambered into the saddle with difficulty, and St. Evelyn led him home.

Hubert Podifat did not return to the Hall till late in the evening, but he could not escape his punishment. A message came to him, through Gibbings, that Colonel St. Evelyn wished to speak to him directly he came in; and Gibbings, to prevent any mistakes, himself escorted the youth to the Colonel's sanctum.

This was a small room off the entrance-hall, which in Sir Percy's days had been used by the bailiff, but which St. Evelyn had now appropriated. It was called "the Colonel's study," but it was rather a smoking-room and business room than a library. Books were altogether absent, with the exception of a local directory, two or three ledgers, "Hutchinson on Dog-breaking," and "Youatt on the Horse."

Hubert came in with a half reckless, half hang-dog air of a boy about to be birched. The Colonel, who was smoking in an arm-chair by the fire, looked at him fixedly for some minutes without speaking, and without asking him to sit down.

"You ought to be properly ashamed of yourself," he said at last. "How dare you take Sir Carysfort Lezaire to that filthy pothouse?"

"It was he took me," replied Hubert, sullenly.

"I don't believe a word of it. It is you who lead, not that silly young fool. But there shall be an end of this; you will prepare to leave the Hall the first thing to-morrow."

Hubert looked at him stupidly, as though he failed to realize the meaning of his words.

"You understand? Pack your traps this very night; to-morrow you march!"

"Where am I to go?" Hubert asked, with a sulky scowl. He was beginning to understand.

"That's not so easy to settle. You're not fit to earn your living; but I have considered all that. I will arrange for you to be bound to Coppocks, the land-surveyors in Market Reepham, and kept until you are through your articles."

Hubert made no sign of assent or disapproval, but stood there looking as though he hated St. Evelyn with his whole heart.

"Well, as you've nothing to say, you can take yourself off. Remember, to-morrow you leave the Hall."

Hubert Podifat slunk away to the housekeeper's room, where he found Mrs. Leleu. She attacked him at once.

"This is a pretty time to show yourself! Where have you been all day?"

Hubert made no answer, but sat down, brooding and staring into the fire.

"Haven't you got a tongue in your head? Where have you been? Don't you want any supper? It's very late, but you can have something."

Hubert still sat mute.

"What's taken the lad? Are you ill? In trouble? What's the matter?"

There was more kindness in Mrs. Leleu's tone than might have been expected from her. She seemed to have a certain liking for this ill-favored dependent who occupied such nondescript position at the Hall.

"I am going away," said Hubert, at length.

"Away? What! going to leave the Hall!"

Hubert nodded.

"Impossible! Of your own accord?"

"No; it's him."

The pronoun thus used ungrammatically referred to Colonel St. Evelyn. The house-keeper quite understood this. Since the Colonel's access to power, he had come to be called simply "he" or "him" by the establishment, like the captain of a ship by his crew.

"The meddlesome, hectoring, hateful brute!" cried Mrs. Leleu.
"But what brought him on the top of you?"

Hubert briefly related what had occurred that afternoon.

"So you took young master to see a fight? Well! where's the harm? If it was good enough for you, it was not too bad for him."

"The Colonel hates me. He don't want Sir Carysfort and me to be together."

"Why shouldn't you be together? It's natural enough."

Hubert looked at her a little surprised.

"How so?" he asked.

"You'll know some of these days. Well, what are you going to do? Are you going to take your orders from him?"

"What else?"

"You are a poor creature! You have no more spirit than a mouse. If I was in your shoes, I woud complain to my la...; I would see what Sir Carysfort had to say. You must show fight, d'ye hear?"

"What's the good? He's far too strong for us. How I hate him, the beast!"

"If you won't, I will. I'll have a talk with her ladyship the first thing in the morning. The Colonel shan't have it all his own way here. He may not find it so easy to get round me."

But Mrs. Leleu was herself to have a passage of arms with the Colonel next day, a description of which must be reserved for a fresh chapter.

CHAPTER X.

THE COLONEL WORSTED.

It cannot be said that St. Evelyn shirked the responsibilities or duties, as he saw them, of his position as guardian to Sir Carysfort

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Lezaire. He was ready to use his best energies and give up his whole time, if necessary, in the interests of his ward. Very soon after his arrival at Straddlethorpe, he had seen that the establishment required searching reform, and he had devoted himself *con amore* to the task. An active, energetic, managing man, with a leaven of administrative capacity, and a strong bias towards interference, he quickly asserted himself, and made his authority felt throughout the Hall.

They tried a fall with him—many of the old and reputed faithful servants of the Lezaires—but all were easily and often badly thrown.

The bailiff resented a too searching inquiry into the disposal of some of the crops; Colonel St. Evelyn showed him that he was well up in the qualities of hay—that he knew to a penny its market price.

The woodman wanted to give a manifestly cheap bargain to a Market Reepham timber merchant of some fallen trees; quite unexpectedly the Colonel called in an expert from the other end of the county, and had an entirely new valuation made.

Peters, the coachman, was near coming to conspicuous grief. The old man had never forgiven St. Evelyn his defiance of my lady's arrangements with regard to the stables, and he was as uncivil always as he dared be to the new power at the Hall.

"Peters," said St. Evelyn suddenly one day, "do you keep a forage-book?"

"Never heard tell of such a thing."

"You'll have to begin one directly. I must have a record of receipts and issues. And I'll take the buying, when anything is wanted, into my own hands."

"My lady has trusted me to buy everything these ten years past."

"I can quite believe it," said the Colonel, drily, "and the consequence is her half-dozen horses have eaten as much as a troop of cavalry. We'll put an end to that."

"I beant a-going to stop here if I'm not trusted."

"You can clear out when you please. But we'll have a settlement before you go, my fine fellow, remember that."

The Colonel looked so ugly and magisterial as he said this, that Peters changed his tone. He became the most submissive of coachmen, ready to carry out implicitly any instructions.

It was the same all through the household, at least so far as the men were concerned. St. Evelyn expected more trouble with the women, or more exactly the head of the female department—for he wisely resolved to govern the other sex through the housekeeper, their responsible chief.

But before tackling Mrs. Leleu, he fortified himself by speaking to Lady Lezaire.

"I am sure there is waste in the housekeeping," he had said.

"Is that an innuendo levelled against me?" Lady Lezaire asked, but with less indignation than she would have shown a month or two earlier. She was not so combative nowadays.

"Of course not," replied the Colonel, blandly. "I mean that your housekeeper is so entirely uncontrolled—"

Lady Lezaire laughed uneasily. This also was a covert insinuation.

"She takes so much upon herself, you understand," went on the Colonel, putting it in another way, "that I think her books ought to be looked into, her expenditure examined."

"I cannot see the necessity," Lady Lezaire protested. "Mrs. Leleu has been here for four or five years, and I have never had any fault to find with her."

"Did she come to you well recommended?"

"Naturally. I forget by whom at this moment, but of course she had an excellent character or I should not have engaged her."

"She may be as honest as the day, yet not careful. In Carysfort's best interests I feel convinced her accounts ought to be controlled."

"Mrs. Leleu won't like it, I warn you."

"She will have the remedy in her own hands; she can leave."

"Would you go as far as that?" asked Lady Lezaire. "I should not like to lose her," she would have added, but the man's determined, masterful spirit frightened her.

"Why not? Discipline must be maintained."

But he did not find the housekeeper prepared to succumb without a struggle.

"You will be good enough to bring me the house-books every Tuesday morning to my study," he said abruptly to Mrs. Leleu the morning Hubert had been ordered to leave the Hall.

"Why should I show them to you? Lady Lezaire has never asked to see them all these years," replied the housekeeper, rather impudently.

"Because I tell you to do so," said the Colonel coolly, looking hard at Mrs. Leleu. He met a pair of dark, defiant eyes, eyes as bold and black as his own, and a fierce face in which there were no signs of surrender.

"I shall only take my orders from her ladyship personally," said the housekeeper, with increasing insolence.

"The next orders you will receive will be to leave the house—if necessary this very day," went on the Colonel, with the air of a man who meant to hold his own.

"You want to turn everybody out of the house, Colonel St. Evelyn. I have heard of your cruelty to that poor creature, Hubert Podifat."

"I think you had better mind your own business, Mrs. Leleu," said the Colonel, sternly.

"But you are not my master; I have never recognized you as such. I will see my lady, and hear what she has to say,"—and Mrs. Leleu walked off, tossing her head.

She was the first person at the Hall who had resisted St. Evelyn's authority, but she was not to profit much by her temporary triumph.

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all the satisfaction she got from Lady Lezaire—"unless, indeed, you prefer to leave."

"I have been very comfortable here, my lady, and I don't like change. But it's a little hard to have a new master put over me."

"Everybody must give in to the Colonel. He is acting for Sir Carysfort, the real master."

"I don't think Sir Carysfort will like the last thing the Colonel's done."

"What do you mean?"

"He has sent that poor Hubert Podifat away from the Hall this morning."

"Sent him away? For good and all?"

"I saw Gibbings, the Colonel's man, driving him away in the tax-
cart early this morning. Going to Market Reepham, I believe.
Hubert is to be bound to Coppocks, the land-surveyors."

"And Sir Carysfort knows?"

"I don't believe it, my lady."

"I will see him as soon as possible, and settle what is to be done.
But as to you, Mrs. Leleu, you will have to give in to the Colonel
or go."

It did not suit Mrs. Leleu to leave Straddlethorpe Hall just then,
and she preferred to make her submission to the autocratic mayor
of the palace, who now reigned supreme. But if she yielded, it
was with a bad grace, and she treasured up much resentment
against St. Evelyn in her heart.

Meanwhile Sir Carysfort, anxious to hear the end of the previous
day's escapade, had been waking all the echoes with cries of
"Hubert! Hubert!" They told him that Hubert had gone to
Market Reepham.

"What?—alone?"

"Gibbings took him over," said old Peters, maliciously. "I don't
think Hubert's coming back to the Hall."

"What do you mean?"

"The Colonel has given him the sack."

"Hubert gone! Oh, what a jolly shame!" The boy flushed
angrily.

"It's the Colonel's doing; he's master here now."

"We'll see about that. I chose him for my guardian, and I'm
precious sorry for it. He thinks himself the Great Mogul."

Carysfort went open-mouthed to his mother, whom he found
ready enough to listen to his grievances.

"The Colonel," he began, "I hate him! Oh, mother, have you
heard what he has done?"

"Mrs. Leleu told me."

"But you won't let Hubert be kept away? I could never stand
that. You'll speak to him, won't you?"

"Why has Colonel St. Evelyn taken such a dislike to poor
Hubert?" asked Lady Lezaire evasively.

"How can I tell? you had better ask him," said the boy, not

choosing to confess the previous day's escapade. "But I won't stand this, and I'll tell him so to his face. Come along, mother, let's go and find him"—and the young baronet dragged Lady Lezaire rather reluctantly towards the Colonel's study, where they found him looking over a number of cigars.

"I say, Colonel, what a beastly shame to send off Hubert like that, without saying a word!"

St. Evelyn ignored the boy, and addressed himself to the mother.

"You will, I am sure, approve of the step I have taken, Lady Lezaire, when I tell you what happened yesterday."

"I don't care," interrupted Carysfort; "it's a beastly shame, and I won't stand it!"

"I think when you consider, Colonel St. Evelyn, how attatched dear Carysfort is to Hubert Podifat," said Lady Lezaire, temporizing, "you will agree that it would have been better not to take so decided a step. Hubert had better be sent for."

"I will never consent to that; he is ruining your son. Carysfort will be grateful to me some day for having broken this disreputable connection."

"I shan't!" cried Carysfort, rudely, "and I will have Hubert back!" You're a beast, Colonel, a brute! you bully everybody here, but you shan't bully me. I am the real master, and I would sooner have Hubert here than you. I tell you he shall come back. I won't be contradicted,—I will have my own way. You are a beast, I say, and I hate you!"

Carysfort had gradually worked himself up into an ungovernable passion; but after he had delivered himself of this violent tirade, he threw himself on the sofa, and stormed, and kicked, and bellowed with rage. Lady Lezaire's anxiety now was all for her son; she strove to soothe and pacify him, and rang the bell for assistance. The housekeeper was called in, and not without difficulty Sir Carysfort, who was nearly beside himself, was got away to his room. He continued in a state of hysterical excitement for some hours; the doctor had been sent for, and sedatives administered. The boy was quieter and better towards evening, but his mother was terribly concerned, and in her heart greatly incensed against the Colonel.

She was too proud to make a direct appeal to St. Evelyn, the justice of whose decision with regard to Hubert she could hardly deny. But Rachael tried to appease her husband, and the gentle little wife eventually talked him over.

Hubert's appearance at Sir Carysfort's bedside that same evening immediately restored the boy to health. Next day he was about again as usual, and more devoted to Hubert than ever. Colonel St. Evelyn he studiously shunned, but when they unavoidably met Carysfort's manner was surly and distant, and it was quite evident that the fight over Hubert had completely estranged the young baronet.

Among the many enemies the Colonel had made at Straddlethorpe,

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CHAPTER XI.

COUNTY VEXATIONS.

ALTHOUGH Colonel St. Eve lynhad established himself pretty firmly at the Hall, his stay was not without its vexations.

It was not pleasant for a man of his masterful spirit to be successfully opposed. He had certainly got the worst of it with regard to the young baronet and his friend. Hubert Podifat had returned, almost triumphantly, to Straddlethorpe, and the Colonel felt that every one rejoiced in his defeat.

The unmistakable dislike Sir Carysfort now openly evinced was another thorn in the Colonel's side. It showed itself in brusque, often rude replies; sometimes in doggedly silent contempt. For days and days guardian and ward were absolutely "cuts"; at other times they wrangled perpetually.

To be the object of constant undisguised aversion is nearly certain to evoke the same sentiment, and St. Evelyn grew more and more piqued; any liking he had once for the lad presently disappeared.

Lady Lezaire was on her son's side, of course. She encouraged him in his defiant behaviour, and, gaining courage from her boy's boldness, permitted herself to be positively uncivil to St. Evelyn.

Repeated very plain hints that he had overstayed his welcome at the Hall was one of many methods of showing their ill feeling.

"Why doesn't he go away?" Sir Carysfort would often ask. "He has been here long enough. I thought he only came on a visit, not to stay for years."

"Of course Rachael could not have been moved till quite lately," — a child had recently been born to the St. Evelyns—"but now that is safely over, there is no reason why they should not leave the Hall."

"I wish you'd tell him so. I hate the sight of him, and I know he hates me."

Lady Lezaire was not long in finding an excuse for conveying Sir Carysfort's views. The hint was a very plain one.

"Brooke Lodge is in the market," she said next day at the luncheon-table.

"Oh!" observed the Colonel, blandly. "And where is Brooke Lodge?"

"It is a charming little house the other side of Market Reepham, very compact and complete, and going quite cheap, I believe. You know it, Rachel, don't you?"

"Oh yes," replied her daughter, blushing. With a woman's rapid intuition she had already fathomed Lady Lezaire's remark. "The Duboulays lived there, I think."

"Yes, and the Creichtons. You might ride over and look at it, Colonel," went on Lady Lezaire.

"I! Why should I? I don't want the thing. I'm comfortable enough where I am," replied St. Evelyn, with a brutal frankness that for the moment silenced Lady Lezaire.

The fact was, it by no means suited the Colonel's book to set up an establishment of his own. He was still secretly worried by his financial affairs. Although marriage had relieved him of many many pressing anxieties, it had put no large amount of ready money at his disposal, and he had still a large balance of unsettled debts.

These he had hoped to pay off by degrees, by economies on the substantial income accruing from the investment of Rachel's portion,—economies made the more easy by his prolonged residence at the Hall.

Had he been more prudent, he might have seen the end of his troubles but he could not resist the temptation to back the winner, and the winners of his choice had too often disappointed him. Within this year his settlements after Ascot and Goodwood had left him terribly to the bad.

Something stronger than mere hints were needed to dislodge him from Straddlethorpe. The old soldier liked his quarters, and knew when he was well off.

There were those who would have liked to have got rid of the Colonel, not alone from the Hall but from Thorpeshire. He had outlived his popularity in the county, and the more he was known the less he was liked.

He took too much upon himself, people said. He was too interfering, too busy, too ready to domineer, and manage everybody and everything his own way. Now he wanted to revolutionize the Highway Board, next the county asylum, then the county jail. Things went on quietly enough till he came into the neighborhood; why could he not let them be? What if the jail was old-fashioned, dark, ill-ventilated, on too small a scale? It had served for generations—for centuries even. Who was this Colonel St. Evelyn—a stranger, an outsider, a new-comer in the county—who presumed to complain?

Antagonism and discontent rose to their highest pitch when he sought to foist a creature of his own, an old brother officer, into the governorship of the jail. Thorpeshire was tenacious of its county patronage; its appointments had been jobbed, handsomely, from time immemorial—invariably given to some local candidate; whether the most competent and suitable mattered very little.

Yet St. Evelyn managed to win the day. Active, indefatigable, uncompromising in his championship, an unwearied canvasser, he carried all before him. The election was closely contested. The county was split up into two hostile camps, party spirit ran high; but the Colonel's nominee was the successful candidate, and Captain Ruddock, formerly of the Royal Rangers, was duly elected governor of the jail.

This success, and not strangely, embittered the feeling already hostile to Colonel St. Evelyn. No one hated him more cordially than General Wyndham-Parker, who had been his most strenuous opponent at the recent election. The General was a county man with a small estate heavily encumbered; not too affluent, therefore, and blessed with many daughters, one of whom had married his old aide-de-camp.

This gentleman, Captain Richards, now retired, had been a candidate for the jail governorship, and his defeat was taken in very bad part. The crime of it was of course visited upon Colonel St. Evelyn.

A very lively discussion followed the election. Many of the magistrates who lived too far off to return home to lunch met at the Raven Hotel after their labors were ended.

"He's a sharp, sensible sort of fellow anyway," said Mr. Etherly, who had supported the successful candidate, and was anxious to justify himself.

"You say that because you voted for him," remarked another, laughing.

"He's not a gentleman," said General Wyndham-Parker, a sharp-nosed, ferret-eyed, fidgety little man, who had once held a command, and thought himself entitled ever afterwards to take the lead. It was intolerable to him that St. Evelyn, so much his junior in military rank, should not bow before him. "How could you bring yourselves to choose a low-born, common cad like that——"

"At least he's sound in wind and limb," said Sir Archibald Bright, another of the opposition. The General's son-in-law was evidently a weakly creature, and this had really turned the election.

"I suppose that is aimed at Richards," retorted the General, fiercely. "If his health is indifferent, it was damaged in the service of his country."

"But the county jail is not a home for convalescents," put in old Etherly.

"At any rate, I don't envy the new man his billet," said Sir Archibald Milman, to turn the conversation.

"He won't be without friends," observed one of St. Evelyn's side. "The Colonel will see he's not bullied."

"He may not be here always to stand by his nominee," replied General Wyndham-Parker, darkly.

"Why, what's to become of the Colonel? You won't get rid of him so easily."

"That's what my lady thinks. But he can't stay at the Hall for ever."

"Of course not. The boy is growing up; he will be of age in a few years. You don't suppose he will let the Colonel go on cadging then?"

"St. Evelyn will have feathered his nest by that time."

"Or have turned the right bird out."

"I don't see how he's to do that."

"He's not a man to stick at trifles, you may depend," said General Wyndham-Parker, with bitter meaning.

"Oh! come, I say," cried old Etherly. "He's not half a bad chap. I don't think it's fair to make such remarks."

"No; but really," asked another, who had hitherto stood neutral, "what do you think made St. Evelyn so keen about bringing this fellow in?"

"Public spirit, of course," replied a champion promptly.

"Public spirit be hanged! It's not that; it's his nasty, interfering, domineering ways."

"He wants a friend against the day he's sent to jail," cried the General, still angrily, determined to think of evil.

"Oh, I say, draw it mild! St. Evelyn in jail! What in heaven for?"

"Well, to begin with, if there was imprisonment for debt nowadays, he'd be run in fast enough."

"Do you suppose he's really hard up?"

"He hadn't a sixpence when he married. And look at his tastes, all expensive; keeps any number of nags, dresses no end, smokes half-crown cigars."

"Then he plunges tremendously."

"Always ready to take or lay the odds."

"Or sit down to whist at five-pound points."

"Well, he goes the pace certainly; but after all, that's his affair. And he must have got a good round sum with Rachel Lezaire. If it's nothing worse than debt ——"

"You wait," said the general, sticking pertinaciously to his point. "There'll be something far worse than that one of these days, mark my words."

Every one laughed at this, no one more heartily than St. Evelyn himself, to whom the whole conversation was in due course retailed.

But it will be readily understood that the Colonel's life was not altogether happy in Thorpeshire.

CHAPTER XII.

DOCTORS DO NOT DIFFER.

LET us return now to the sick-room where young Sir Carysford Lezaire lay at the point of death.

"My boy! my boy!" cried Lady Lezaire. "Do tell me—are you in great pain?"

The only answer her son vouchsafed was to roll his eyes vacantly towards her.

"Oh, Mr. Freshener!" went on the unhappy mother, "surely you are not quite helpless. Do something, anything, I implore you,"

"I am most anxious, my lady, I assure you. As the stomach-pump is here, I will use it, for it is now past seven, and I expect Sir Peregrine or Dr. Robinson every minute."

"Perhaps before they arrive my dearest son will have succumbed. Do not, I beseech you, delay. Try and give dear Carysfort some relief."

The medical process which followed need not be described in detail. But Mr. Freshener examined the result with considerable interest, and afterwards appeared more perplexed than ever.

To these poor bewildered creatures, the news that a carriage approached was welcome in the extreme. Mrs. St. Evelyn went to window, and, opening it, looked down the drive.

"Is it empty?" cried Lady Lezaire, in a tone of the utmost concern.

"No," replied her daughter; "I can plainly see a figure inside."

"That must be Sir Peregrine. How good of him to be so prompt!" —and Lady Lezaire hastily passed down the grand staircase to meet the London doctor as he entered the hall.

She was forestalled, however, by Colonel St. Evelyn, and when her ladyship reached the foot of the staircase she saw the retreating figure of her son-in-law and Sir Peregrine as they went into the study.

They had closed the door behind them, and Lady Lezaire, although she at once followed, paused irresolute as if hesitating to enter. In spite of the sickening anxiety which oppressed her, she still yielded an involuntary submission to the man's stronger will.

The two men remained closeted together for some time—a period which seemed quite interminable to poor Lady Lezaire, but it was in fact something under a quarter of an hour. At length Lady Lezaire could brook no further delay. Going up to the door, she knocked nervously, and without waiting for an answer, entered the room.

"I really beg your pardon, Sir Peregrine."

The London physician looked enquiringly at Colonel St. Evelyn.

"Allow me to introduce you," said the Colonel; "this is Lady Lezaire, the baronet's mother. She is naturally anxious, as you may suppose, to have the benefit of your advice for her son."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Lady Lezaire; "but surely this is no time for compliments. I must beg you, implore you, to come up and see my son at once."

"Of course," replied Sir Peregrine—"that is the sole object of my visit. I was only asking this gentleman here"—and he waved his white hand blandly towards St. Evelyn—"what were the facts of the case. It is quite impossible, you must understand, my dear Lady Lezaire, to arrive at a correct diagnosis without full information as to all the antecedents."

"Surely I could have told you all that better," again interrupted Lady Lezaire, with both petulance and indignation in her voice; or Mr. Freshener, our regular attendant, could have informed you better than any one else."

"Oh!" observed Sir Peregrine, as if a new light was breaking in upon him. "There is a general practitioner, then, in charge of the case?"

"Of course," replied Lady Lezaire; "he is up-stairs at this moment with my son."

"That being so, I had better join him at once."

Lady Lezaire led the way, and Sir Peregrine, with Colonel St. Evelyn, followed. They found Mr. Freshener seated by the bedside, but he rose on the appearance of the great leader of his profession, and made the profound obeisance which local obscurity likes to pay to metropolitan greatness.

"We were most grieved, Sir Peregrine," said little Mr. Freshener, rubbing his hands, "to encroach upon your valuable time; but the matter seemed so urgent, and the case, I may say, so mysterious, that I felt it was imperative to get the highest medical skill."

"Have you arrived at any decision? Is there nothing in the symptoms to give you a line?"

"The symptoms are marked and plain enough. But they all point to a solution which I cannot but feel to be impossible and absurd."

"Kindly go over them," said Sir Peregrine, knitting his brows and assuming that air of abstraction which implies acute mental effort.

A whispered colloquy followed: after the first half-dozen words uttered by Mr. Freshener, Sir Peregrine visibly grew more and more interested.

"Why, it seems to me perfectly obvious," he muttered; "these are the plainest symptoms of—"

He paused suddenly and looked round. The word to which he would not give utterance formulated a very grave charge against some person or persons unknown. But with characteristic and professional caution he reserved his judgment until the fullest evidence was forthcoming.

No improvement had shown itself in Sir Carysfort's condition. His physical sufferings were extreme, but they were scarcely greater than the mental anguish of those who stood around. Presently the whispered conference between the two doctors ceased, and Sir Peregrine, having fortified himself with the local practitioner's opinion, proceeded to examine the patient for himself. Lady Lezaire hung nervously upon his movements, and keenly scanned the doctor's sphinx-like face.

The examination ended, Sir Peregrine looked portentously grave, but vouchsafed no remark. A pause of some minutes followed, when Sir Peregrine himself broke the silence by saying to the other doctor—

"Mr. Fresh—"

"Freshener, Sir Peregrine."

"I think I must speak to you in private," and the two withdrew to another room. Their conference was long protracted, and when they at length returned, Sir Carysfort seemed at his last gasp.

He was quite conscious as the end drew near. He knew his

mother and sister who each held one of his wasted hands. He smiled feebly at his friend Hubert, and spoke to all a few broken words of farewell.

The baronet appeared also to recognize Colonel St. Evelyn, who came in at this supreme moment, but gave him no greeting, and seemed at first altogether indifferent to his presence.

He gradually grew weaker and more faint, and at length a species of comatose lethargy took possession of him, from which there appeared no prospect of recovery.

All at once, however, by a violent effort, he raised himself in the bed, and with wild haggard eyes pointed a finger at Colonel St. Evelyn; then with a half-uttered groan, sank back on his pillow and expired.

It was a most painful and terrible scene. Lady Lezaire, now completely unnerved, went into violent hysterics, in which her daughter out of sympathy presently joined, while Mrs. Leleu, the housekeeper, who came in at the last moment, tried to soothe and pacify them. The doctors looked at each other like men who have a grave secret in common. Hubert Podifat threw himself on the foot of the bed and sobbed aloud, convulsed with a most poignant sorrow.

The only person who stood quite unmoved was Colonel St. Evelyn. He was the first to break the silence of that grim and ghastly chamber of death, and said to Sir Peregrine Falcon—

"Now all is over, it is needless to prolong this painful scene. Nothing remains to be done, I presume, but to pay the last tributes of respect."

"Pardon me," interrupted Sir Peregrine, "something very important remains. I consider that a *post mortem* is absolutely indispensable. Do you agree with me, Mr. Freshener?"

"Certainly, Sir Peregrine, or I should withhold the certificate."

"Am I understand, then," asked St. Evelyn, "that you are in doubt as to the cause of death?"

"Not exactly in doubt," replied the great doctor; "we have more than a strong suspicion. But we wish to make assurance doubly sure."

"Suspicion! Can it be possible that you imagine there has been foul play?"

"Foul play is a strong term," replied Sir Peregrine, "and we make no accusations—only we must have well-substantiated facts."

"Your wishes are naturally law, and every facility shall be given you," said Colonel St. Evelyn, in a somewhat constrained manner.

"It will be necessary also," put in Mr. Freshener, to give notice to the coroner, as an inquest must be held."

"Surely that is unnecessary—it will only cause a serious scandal in the county."

"The necessity will depend upon the result of the *post mortem*. But unless all our suspicions are completely falsified—unless, indeed, our whole knowledge and acumen have suddenly deserted us—I

fear that, scandal or no scandal, a coroner's inquest will have to be held."

"As I am a magistrate for the county," replied the Colonel, "it would ill beseem me to throw any obstacles in the way of executing the law. I myself will summon the coroner, although I repeat that I consider the proceeding rather uncalled for."

Sir Peregrine bowed gravely, but made no further remark. He had not come a hundred miles from London to be taught his duty by a provincial justice of the peace. Mr. Freshener sided with his professional leader of course, although in Sir Peregrine's absence he might have been overawed by Colonel St. Evelyn's magisterial manner. The Colonel was a power at quarter sessions, and Mr. Freshener, as surgeon of various county institutions, recognized the influence and authority of such an active local magnate.

This short and somewhat unseemly discussion was soon ended, and Mr. Freshener, at the instance of Sir Peregrine, begged that the bedroom might be cleared.

"There were strong reasons," he said, in the most delicate manner possible, "for separating relatives so hastily from those well-beloved remains. But what the doctors had to do must be done without delay."

Poor Lady Lezaire was still almost stupefied by the sudden sorrow which had fallen upon her; but her daughter, although she scarcely realized at first the meaning of this peremptory summons to withdraw, persuaded her mother to leave the room.

The two heart-broken women, with faltering step and dejected air, passed out together. The moment they had left the room, Lady Lezaire's strength seemed to forsake her. She tottered, and was on the point of falling to the ground, but strong arms interposed to save her. They were those of Colonel St. Evelyn, who had followed her out of the room.

The mere sight of her son-in-law seemed to revive her flagging strength. With a sudden effort she broke from his arms and cried passionately—

"Do not touch me! You have robbed me of all I hold most dear in the world."

"Dearest mother!" exclaimed Rachel, "what do you mean by such terrible words?"

"Ask him—the husband you chose. Are you too great a simpleton to understand that he is now the absolute owner, through you, of everything here?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CORONER'S JURY.

THE doctors remained closeted in the death-chamber for more than

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an hour. They were closely engaged upon their painful and unpleasant task, and when they issued forth, their habitual professional gravity had deepened to the darkest gloom. The faces of both showed that they possessed some portentous secret in common, not to be lightly or too readily divulged.

They came down the stairs together, both silent and preoccupied; but in the hall Sir Peregrine said to Mr. Freshener—

"I will leave you, then, to make arrangements. You will understand that time is of the utmost consequence to me. I am wanted in London; my absence at this moment is of the gravest inconvenience to my patients and myself, and I must impress upon you the necessity for releasing me at the earliest, the very earliest, moment possible."

"You may count upon me, Sir Peregrine," replied the local doctor, bowing obsequiously. "My horse is at the door, and I will be over at once to Market Reepham."

"The coroner lives there?"

"Yes, Sir Peregrine—it is the county town, and the headquarters of the police. They will have to be informed."

"Assuredly, and some magistrate. It may be necessary to issue warrants."

"The coroner's will suffice, if they find——"

"Well, well," said Sir Peregrine; "we must not anticipate the verdict, although my mind is perfectly clear. However, I will not detain you."

"I shall be back here in less than a couple of hours, Sir Peregrine. I will beg the coroner to impanel a jury at Market Reepham, and we will all come over together."

"Thank you, that will be the best. I think now I shall beg them to allow me to retire, and get a little rest."

A servant was called who found the housekeeper, Mrs. Leleu, and Sir Peregrine was shown to a bedroom. Dr. Freshener then mounted his horse and rode off to Market Reepham.

For a couple of hours the Hall remained perfectly still and quiet, with blinds close drawn, a house of deep mourning. Lady Lezaire had shut herself up alone with her grief; Mrs. St. Evelyn had also retired, after vainly attempting to comfort her mother. The Colonel was in his study, where no one dared to intrude upon him.

He was looking out of the window with a depressed and gloomy air, when the appearance of a couple of flies, followed by a heavy lumbering omnibus, which he recognized as belonging to the Lezaire Arms at Market Reepham, surprised him, as they were driven rapidly up the avenue towards the house.

"What have we here," he muttered. "I wonder whether those doctors have done, and what has become of them?"

All doubt of the meaning of the approaching vehicles was dispelled when they first pulled up, and a superintendent of police jumped out, followed by a short, stout man with long grey whiskers, carrying a black bag.

"Why, it's Chibnal, the coroner! Then there is to be an inquest, and these, I suppose, are the jury."

The next minute he was in the hall, receiving the arrivals.

"Very painful, most unpleasant affair," said little Mr. Chibnal, deferentially. He had always been a little afraid of the Colonel.

"I had no idea there was to be an inquest. Who summoned you?" asked St. Evelyn, briefly.

"Dr. Freshener, the poor, dear young baronet's own medical man."

"The result of the *post mortem* was not altogether satisfactory then?"

"You must not ask me that. I know nothing except what is deposited before me in the open court. Where had the inquest better be held, Colonel?"

"In the gun-room, I should think; there is plenty of room there for the jury and all—a parcel of greasy, dirty ruffians," he said to himself, as he turned away to give the necessary orders.

"The superintendent will arrange all that, and collect the witnesses. Meanwhile, gentlemen"—this was to the jury, who still hung doubtfully and apologetically about the entrance-hall—"we will view the body if you will follow me; Dr. Freshener will show us the way."

A little later the inquest was formally opened, and the first witness, Sir Peregrine Falcon, was called. This was a tribute to his eminence, and in deference to his wish to return to London without delay.

His evidence was startling, and terribly to the point.

"I was summoned," he said, "from London, and arrived here at 8 A.M. this morning. The deceased was suffering from grave symptoms, the cause of which I was at first unable to explain, but longer and closer examination satisfied me that they were due to an irritant poison."

Every one in the room, coroner, jury, and police, started at the word, and many ejaculations of surprise and horror followed.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, pray do not interrupt the witness. You said, Sir Peregrine—"

"I said that I was convinced the deceased had been poisoned. I had no doubt of this, but I felt that an autopsy was desirable—anticipating your wishes in this respect, Mr. Coroner."

"You did perfectly right, Sir Peregrine Falcon. I am obliged to thank you for your promptitude in assisting the law."

"The *post mortem* examination was made by Dr. Freshener and myself, with the result I fully anticipated. We discovered traces of poison in the viscera, more particularly in the liver."

"And the poison was—?"

"Arsenic."

The jury looked at each other with grave, scared faces, and the little coroner, no less perturbed, pulled himself together with the air of a man determined to do his duty, however unpleasant.

"Was the poison present in any large quantity?" asked the coroner.

"No."

"Then it may have been accidentally taken."

"That is as it may be," said the great doctor, "but you must not take it for granted that the quantity discovered in the organs was all that the deceased had swallowed."

"How do you mean, Sir Peregrine?"

"I mean that the action of arsenic is to produce violent retching, during which the poison would be more or less thrown off."

"Was that the case here?"

"I expect so, but I have no proof of it. There was much vomiting, but I regret to say, I much regret to say, the product was not preserved. Had that been done, I think there is no doubt we should have discovered arsenic in it."

"Why was it thrown away?"

"That I can't tell you," said Sir Peregrine, shrugging his shoulders.

"Carelessness?"

"That or——" "something worse," Sir Peregrine would have said, but he checked himself like a prudent man, hesitating to make accusations.

"I gather from what you have already told us, Sir Peregrine, that the deceased in your opinion did not poison himself. Can you throw any light, then, upon the manner in which the arsenic was administered? How, or by whom?"

"I have no doubt that it was administered more than once; the recurrence of the worst symptoms at certain intervals would indicate that. But as to how or by whom administered, I am really unable to enlighten you in the least."

"I feared so," said the coroner. "The point is one of the deepest importance, but we must seek information elsewhere."

After this Sir Peregrine was allowed to withdraw, and Dr. Freshener was called in. The local practitioner's medical evidence naturally corroborated Sir Peregrine's, but the coroner hoped he would have something to say on the points his colleague had left in the dark. This was evident from his first question.

"You were called in to the case at its commencement, I believe?"

"Not quite, but at any rate Sir Carysfort had not been ill for more than an hour when I arrived."

"He was in bed?"

"Yes; he had gone to bed directly he was attacked."

"By whom was he attended?"

"By his mother Lady Lezaire, Mrs. St. Evelyn his sister, and the housekeeper Mrs. Leleu."

"Were any of them alone with him at any time?"

"Not to my knowledge—at least, not in the first part of the night; but as it grew later, they took it in turns to sit up with him."

"We have been told that certain grave symptoms recurred at in-

tervals; can you tell us who had been nursing him when they showed themselves?"

"Not very correctly or distinctly, I fear. Those symptoms appeared after each of the ladies had been in the room."

"Were they the only persons who had access to the sick-room?"

"Oh no; the young man, Podifat, was often in the room—in fact he could hardly be persuaded to leave to leave his young friend; and Colonel St. Evelyn came and went frequently." There was a pause.

"You have told us that you arrived about an hour after the illness first declared itself; the deceased was conscious when you arrived?"

"Yes, perfectly. He spoke to me describing what he felt."

"Did he offer any explanation—suggest any cause, I mean—of the violent pains he suffered?"

"No, although I entreated him to do so if he could. I asked him how he had been spending his day,—whether he remembered eating anything likely to disagree with him; but he always shook his head, and declared he could not understand why he was so ill."

There was not much more to be got out of Dr. Freshener, nor indeed from any one else. The inquest sat for several hours, and examined nearly every one in the house. Lady Lezaire, out of deference to her sorrow, was excused, and the jury agreed with the coroner that her evidence was not indispensable. Great pains were taken to get at the bottom of the mystery, but a mystery it remained to the last—a mystery, that is to say, as to how the crime had been committed; but that there had been a crime, no one who heard the evidence had a shadow of doubt.

The coroner's jury did not hesitate to give their opinion plainly. They found that Sir Carysfort Lezaire had met his death by poison, but as to how or by whom the poison had been administered, there was no evidence to show.

CHAPTER XIV.

FURTHER INQUIRY.

It was a case of wilful murder; no one in Thorpeshire had a doubt of that. Sir Carysfort Lezaire had been murdered, poisoned wickedly and secretly in his own home, by some person or persons unknown.

The news spread through the county quickly, creating immense excitement.

Who had done it—and why? This was the question that everyone asked, and everyone wanted to solve. There must be an inquiry, every one was agreed.

But what was everybody's was nobody's business. The day slipped by, yet nothing was done. At length several of the magnates

and leading magistrates put their heads together, and it was decided, after consultation with the chief constable, to employ the police, the details being left to the chief.

Lady Lezaire had been much more prompt. The moment her first paroxysm of grief had subsided, she had communicated with Mr. Tinson, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. The presence of the family lawyer was indeed necessary at Straddlethorpe to regulate the affairs of the succession, and it was only right that he should attend the young baronet's funeral.

Mr. Tinson's first visit on arrival was to Lady Lezaire, with whom he was closeted for more than an hour. Thence he went to his own room, where a message was brought to him that Colonel St. Evelyn would like to speak to him at once.

The Colonel received him in his study.

"It is only by accident, Mr. Tinson, that I have learnt your presence here," he said, rather stiffly, to the lawyer, as he motioned him to a seat; "you might, I think——"

"Lady Lezaire sent for me, and naturally I went straight to her," interrupted Mr. Tinson.

"That was right enough. You are, I suppose, her legal adviser, while you are not necessarily mine, or rather my wife's."

Mr. Tinson instantly became more civil.

"I should, of course, have come to pay my respects, Colonel St. Evelyn, and to take any instructions."

The lawyer knew that Colonel St. Evelyn, through his wife, was now the master of Straddlethorpe, and he had no desire to lose the legal business of so fine a property.

"I have no instructions. It would be indecent to talk about business so soon. I was only complaining of the want of courtesy you have displayed in not coming to see me."

"Nothing of the kind was intended, I assure you. Lady Lezaire had much to say to me, so I went to her first."

"How she hates me, that woman!" cried St. Evelyn, emphatically; "I can't for the life of me think why."

Mr. Tinson looked at him curiously.

"Lady Lezaire was wrapped up in her son."

"Well, is not Rachel, my wife, her daughter? We are both of us ready to devote ourselves to Lady Lezaire, to make up to her somehow for the grievous loss she has sustained. But she keeps Rachel at a distance, and won't see me at all."

"So I understand."

"Did she tell you so?"

"I think, if you will permit me, I will not repeat anything that occurred at my interview with Lady Lezaire. She is my client, as you say, and lawyers, like doctors, are bound to be silent."

"It is quite impossible, if this continues, that we should go on living together. We can hardly remain under the same roof."

"Do you mean that you wish to leave Straddlethorpe?"

"Is it our place to leave? To whom does Straddlethorpe now belong?"

"I had forgotten," said the lawyer, bowing, "for I could not bring myself to believe that Mrs. St. Evelyn would wish to turn her mother out of doors."

"Nor does she—yet. For the present we are going away. It would be most painful to remain here under the circumstances."

"That I can quite believe," observed Mr. Tinson, drily.

"After this terrible heart-breaking accident," went on Colonel St. Evelyn.

"Accident!" cried Mr. Tinson, in evident surprise at the expression.

"Certainly accident. I have no doubt in my own mind that poor Carysfort met his death through some shocking imprudence. He was always running wild about the country—of course I have much reluctance in saying this of the poor dear boy, but it is the truth. He was here, there, and everywhere with his friend Hubert Podifat and he must have picked up, somewhere or other, the stuff that proved fatal to him."

"But unless I am mistaken," protested Mr. Tinson, "the verdict of the inquest, backed up as it was by the clearest medical evidence declared that he had been poisoned by arsenic. Now arsenic, you must admit, is not to be picked up anywhere. You would not find it easy, Colonel, to buy arsenic."

"I! why should I buy arsenic?"

The two men looked fixedly at each other. But Colonel St. Evelyn's eyes did not quail before Mr. Tinson's piercing gaze.

"But I am not so fully convinced, as you appear to be, that arsenic was the cause of death."

"You can't get over the verdict, and Sir Peregrine Falcon's opinion. It's the highest in the medical profession."

"Pshaw! doctors have been wrong before now, and Falcon admitted that the quantity of poisonous matter discovered in the intestines was extremely small. No; I shall not be easily persuaded that there was foul play. Something more tangible must be elicited, and I do not see at present how it is to be obtained."

There was an accent of interrogation in his speech, so Mr. Tinson thought, which put the suspicious lawyer on his guard.

"Do you propose to institute an inquiry?" was his evasive reply.

"I do not see the least necessity for it; does Lady Lezaire?"

"The subject is far too delicate to be touched on at present without her ladyship. At least I should not like to mention it to her; perhaps she will broach the subject to you."

"I tell you she will not see or speak to me. But if she wants to do so, it must be soon."

"You think of leaving the Hall, you say?"

"Yes; directly after the funeral we shall start for the seaside for two or three months. After that, we shall return to establish ourselves here, and I take this opportunity of informing you that we hope to have the Hall to ourselves."

"Is that intended as a message for me to convey to Lady Lezaire?"

"It is. She is a client of yours, as you say, and as she chooses to have no communication with me direct, I cannot do better than speak to her through you."

"When do you wish me to tell her this?"

"Oh! not immediately, of course. You had better wait a few days, till after the funeral, or till we are out of the place. Thank you; that is all I have to say to you, Mr. Tinson. Business, as I told you, will keep." And the Colonel showed Mr. Tinson the door.

Sir Carysfort's funeral was very largely attended. Every one of position in the county came in person or sent his carriage. All the servants at the Hall, Hubert Podifat, most of the tenants on the estate, and many of the tradesmen from Market Reepham, followed.

Colonel St. Evelyn represented the family, as chief mourner, much against Lady Lezaire's wish, indeed in spite of her. But there were no relatives, near or far; the baronetcy was now extinct, and but for the son-in-law the Straddlethorpe carriage would have been empty.

A solemn and decorous gravity, as became the occasion, sat upon the face of the man who was really heir to the deceased. But there were no symptoms of very keen sorrow, and his demeanor was cold and repellent to the few who approached him in the churchyard and after the ceremony with expressions of sympathy. They were few, these friends, and he might see for himself, if he looked round at this great county gathering, that public opinion was against him.

Within a day or two the St. Evelyns left the Hall. It was then that local gossip, fed by vague but increasing suspicion, took more practical shape. The Colonel's hasty departure was exaggerated into disgraceful flight; and it was decided, as has been said, to make further inquiry into the circumstances of Sir Carysfort's death.

CHAPTER XV.

THE POLICE AT WORK.

On the same day that the St. Evelyns left, Mr. Tinson drove over to Market Reepham in a fly ordered from the town, to meet the afternoon express from London. He was waiting on the platform when it disgorged its half-dozen passengers, and he seemed to have no difficulty in recognizing the person he wanted amongst the number.

"Ah, it's you, Faske! I'm glad they've sent you down," was his greeting of a thick-set, quietly dressed man, with sharp eyes and a determined face.

"Well, as you mentioned my name, Mr. Tinson, they could do no less at the Yard," replied the other, rocking his head slightly, as though to balance a rather too loosely-fitting hat on the top of it; "but I shan't be able to stop in these parts long."

Mr. Tinson's face fell.

" You see we're so busy just now. Them Irish are giving no end of trouble, and I'm in that Clerkenwell job. But surely you've got some of the locals at work ? "

" The chief constable has been told by the justices to pick out a young fellow to take charge of the case, and I've just seen him. But nothing has been done yet."

" What like is he ? Where is he ? Young, you say ? Any gumption ? I don't care much for boys with short police experience. They're so cocky — had no failures, you see, and think they can teach us old hands their work. But where is this young chap ? We'd better have a confab without more loss of time."

" He's at the police-station waiting. Shall we go round ? "

In a few minutes more they had been introduced by the chief constable to a young man—he looked like a young gentleman—of pleasant address and excellent manners.

Alfred Earswick, as he was called, had studied medicine, and had taken his diploma, but he had not fallen on his feet as regards practice. After a hard struggle for existence, he had turned his back on his profession and joined the police. He had entered as a common constable, just to get bread, but he had hopes that his superior education and general aptitudes might some day give him advancement in county or borough police.

In appearance Earswick was tall, and rather awkwardly put together. He had a small head for his height, with straight, sandy, reddish hair, which he parted in the middle, and wore rather long. Under pale straw-colored eyebrows were a pair of small but piercing and very mobile grey eyes. He had a slight moustache of the prevailing tone of his hair, but lighter, and a very large mouth plentifully stocked with brilliant white teeth, which he showed a good deal. No one could call him handsome, yet he was not exactly plain, and his face lighted up pleasantly when he talked.

" You are already well up in the case ? " asked the chief constable of the London detective.

" So far as it has been published—nothing more. Is there anything to tell ? Have you come upon any new facts ? "

The latter part of this speech was addressed to the young local detective.

" I have only to-day been instructed to act. I am still quite in the dark as to the whole affair," answered Earswick.

" You've read the report of the inquest, I suppose ? " said Mr. Faske, rather contemptuously.

" No ; I cannot say that I have. But that won't take long. I think you have it, sir," he said, addressing the chief constable.

While the young man read his brief, Mr. Faske nursed his left leg and consulted his shoe-string, as his custom was.

" The first thing in all these cases, according to my idea," he said at length, with the air of a man who had reason to be proud of his ideas, " is to look about and consider who is likely to be most ~~ben~~^{barone} fitted by the crime, if crime there has been."

"As to that there is not the slightest mystery. Sir Carysfort Lezaire's death benefitted one person very considerably," said Mr. Tinson, promptly.

"Yes? To whom do the estates go?"

"To his sister, Mrs. St. Evelyn."

"His sister!" A shade of disappointment crossed Mr. Faske's face. "It is hardly likely that she could have committed the crime."

"Certainly not. No one would think of accusing her—a sweet woman, a little weak perhaps, but no other fault. It is her weakness that brings her so completely under her husband's subjection."

"Her husband is living then?"

"Very much so."

"What sort of character does he bear? Does he live in these parts? Who and what is he?"

"I cannot answer all these questions at once," said Mr. Tinson with some hesitation, and looking at the chief constable to help him. "Captain Bracebridge here has known him—Colonel St. Evelyn, I mean—nearly as long as I have."

"I? Oh, don't ask me! I have nothing to say against Colonel St. Evelyn," protested the chief constable with evident reluctance.

"Hang it all!" cried Faske; "why this beating about the bush? I must know all you know—"

"We know nothing," said both almost in a breath.

"Well, all you think. You must make a clean breast of it always to the police as you would to a doctor. Come."

"For my part I am only possessed of the vaguest suspicions. But I wish to keep nothing from you—don't imagine that."

And Mr. Tinson told the detective everything he knew about St. Evelyn and the Lezaires. He began with the Colonel's appointment as guardian; went on to the marriage; then described the stay at the Hall, and the Colonel's behavior there; his masterful arbitrary ways; the quarrels with the young baronet, and the hatred engendered; last of all, he recounted the closing scenes of the poor lad's short life."

"You say the Colonel made light of the last illness?"

"Distinctly. He laughed at the necessity for calling in a doctor; he opposed Lady Lezaire's sending to London for Falcon; when Falcon came, St. Evelyn kept him as long as possible from the bedside."

"Had the Colonel access to the sick-room?"

"Continually."

"Alone?"

"There is nothing to show that, but it is highly probable."

"Other people went into the sick-room, of course?"

"Naturally. But why suspect any of them? The mother and

the housekeeper, a neutral person; a young fellow, the

baronet's most devoted friend,—were they likely to do the deed?

"To be most benevolent? Why should they?"

"Mrs. St. Evelyn might, under her husband's compulsion."

"Impossible. You would say so if you knew her."

"And the others—of course I exclude the mother—had no interest in the baronet's death?"

"The only people who benefitted by it were the St. Evelyn's."

Mr. Faske was silent for a time.

"Then you believe the Colonel administered the poison?" he said suddenly to Mr. Tinson.

"I never said so," replied the lawyer quickly.

"No; but you plainly implied your belief. Do not be afraid of sticking to it. Frankly—I quite agree with you."

"I knew you would," cried Mr. Tinson, delighted.

"But you have no proof—not the slightest proof," interposed the chief constable.

"For that we must depend upon our young friend here," said Faske patronizingly, as he put his hand upon Earswick's shoulder. "We must send him into the enemy's camp."

"To the Hall?" asked Earswick.

"Certainly. Are you afraid? The Colonel won't eat you Besides—"

"The Colonel's not there; he left this morning."

"Gone? Abroad? Yes? Do you mean to tell me you Thorpe shire police have let him slip through your fingers like that?"

"He has only gone to France."

"France! Pshaw! There's extradition with France. You hear of him next in Sweden or in Spain—somewhere beyond the reach of a warrant. Yah! Fancy that!"

It is impossible to express the London detective's disgust. He promptly gave up nursing his leg, and jumping to his feet strode and down the room.

"To bolt would be to give up all profit from the murder. Would he do that, do you think, and while he still believes there is no evidence against him?" suggested the chief constable.

"There's something in that," said Faske, becoming more calm.

"Whether or not, the mystery ought to be unravelled," put Earswick, who was all eagerness to get to work. "The process should be forthcoming, the case prepared. Fearing nothing, I will no doubt return one of these fine days, and then——"

"You're right, young man. We must proceed with the inquiry so far as it will go—at least you must, Mr. Earswick. So prepare to take up your quarters at the Hall."

"Shall I go openly?" asked the young police officer.

"Are you known there?"

"I don't think so. But some of the servants may have seen in the town here at Sessions' time."

"It will be better to remain *incog.* You will be freer, and get your information easier," said Faske.

"How shall I disguise myself?"

"What will be the best, Mr. Tinson? Can't we get him without exciting suspicion?"

"He could go as my clerk," replied the lawyer. "The change of ownership must lead to lots of work: taking inventories, sorting papers, and so forth. It would be quite natural for me or one of my people to be constantly at the Hall."

"Of course Lady Lezaire would have to know," suggested the chief constable.

"Is she safe?" asked Faske, anxiously.

"As any of us. Lady Lezaire will only too gladly help the law. She would be truly rejoiced, I feel sure, if the real murderer met with his deserts."

"Can you make up like a lawyer's clerk, Mr. Earswick?" was Faske's next question.

"Why not? Wait half an hour, and tell me if you know me, or would take me for anything else."

The man who by-and-by returned to the police office bore no resemblance to the young detective.

It was a lantern-jawed, lank-haired, middle-aged man, dressed untidily in rusty black, with a wisp of white neckcloth and crumpled linen. His hair, his eyebrows, and his moustache were dyed black, and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles hid the brightness of his insatiable eyes.

"That will do first-rate," said Faske, approvingly.

"You're not a clerk to be proud of," added Mr. Tinson, with a laugh. "But I've seen fellows like you. Come along. I'll give you a blue bag and some bundles of papers, and we'll drive straight to the Hall."

"Stay," said the chief constable to his subordinate. "How are we to communicate?"

"By post. There is a letter-box just at the Lodge gates," said the lawyer.

"Remember you must post everything yourself, and be careful; cautious and cunning, that's your motto. But use both your eyes and your ears."

This was Faske's parting advice as the detective followed Mr. Tinson into the fly.

CHAPTER XVI.

EARSWICK ALIAS QUELCH.

The day was closing in when Mr. Tinson and his clerk reached Straddlethorpe. They were shown at once into the library, the room appropriated by the lawyer, where Mr. Quelch, for so Earswick was to be called, waited while Mr. Tinson had an interview with Lady Lezaire.

"Everything is settled," said the lawyer, by-and-by. "Lady Lezaire thoroughly understands. As my clerk you will have every facility, Mr. Earswick—"

" Quelch, you mean."

" I beg your pardon, Quelch. You will use this room for business during the day, take your meals in the housekeeper's room, and sleep in the servant's wing; in fact, have the run of the whole place."

" It'll be odd if I don't run up against something soon. I'd like to begin at once. May I ask you one or two questions?"

" By all means. Go on."

" The servants here—do you know anything of them ?

" Very little. This is my first visit to the Hall for some years.

" That was the butler, I think, who let us in? Long here?"

" I think not. He is only a lad, as you saw. Puttin by the Colonel, I believe, who said the old man made too free with the port."

" The coachman?"

" He is a very old servant I know, and has stood his ground, although the Colclnel was pretty hard on him."

" Had the Colonel a man of his own?"

" Yes, Gibbings, by name, an old soldier. Looked a smart little man, although I never spoke to him."

" Gone with his master?"

" I really cannot say. You'll easily find out."

" And this housekeeper; if I am to live at her table I shall see a good deal of her. It is as well to be prepared. What of her?"

" I only know her as a superior sort of woman. Civil-spoken, rather a foreign appearance, dark dark eyes, pale face, self-possessed, with a determined look about her."

" Been here long?"

" Half-a-dozen years, I believe."

" Not a nominee of the Colonel's, then?"

" Certainly not. I heard they had several tussles at first."

" But she is still here?"

" I suppose she gave way."

" A wise woman. But she's not likely to love the Colonel all the same. If I can only get her to talk."

But it was not so easy to make Mrs. Leleu talk. When the lawyer's clerk, Mr. Quelch, made his way to the snug room the housekeeper called her own, he found a table liberally spread after the Thorpe-shire fashion for " high tea." Mrs. Leleu received him civilly, and pressed him to partake of the many good things provided—the cold goose, the ham-and-eggs, the pressed tongue, the potted beef, and the half-a-dozen dishes of sweets—but this hospitable duty performed she lapsed into silence, answering his many questions by mono-syllables or not at all.

" Here's diet for a hungry Londoner," he cried.

No remark.

" I don't often sit down to such a spread."

" Ah!"

" Won't you be tempted with a slice of tongue, or a little goose?"

" Thank you; no."

" Of course; I see. Sad time this; can't eat. But you should, you should, or you'll lose strength."

" You were very fond of him, I suppose?" Mr. Quelch inquired feelingly, trying another line.

" Who?"

" The young master; the poor young fellow that's gone."

Mrs. Leleu nodded.

" So sudden too! Only ill one day, I hear. Only twenty-four hours!"

" Twelve,"

" Dear, dear! how sad! And the cause, the real cause, no one knows?"

" I don't."

This was not encouraging, but Mr. Quelch would take no rebuff.

" Ought we to have begun?" he continued, pointing to a third place, still empty, at table. " You're expecting some one else?"

" No one—to speak of. Young Podifat," replied Mrs. Leleu, briefly and ungraciously.

" Oh!" The lawyer's clerk had not yet heard of Hubert Podifat, and he was wondering to whom Mrs. Leleu had referred thus disparagingly when Hubert himself slouched into the room and flung himself into a chair near the window.

" Now, manners," cried Mrs. Leleu, peremptorily.

Hubert's head was sunk low between his shoulders, and his ungainly body lay half collapsed in the seat.

" Come to the table and eat your tea," went on the housekeeper more angrily; and with a sulky half-silly air the youth presently complied.

" Who's that chap?" he asked with his mouth full, nodding towards Mr. Quelch. " What's he doing here?"

" Speak more civilly. A friend of my lady's." Mrs. Leleu looked ashamed of Hubert's rudeness, and as if to turn it off began talking with the lawyer's clerk.

" How long have you been with Harveys?"

" Harveys?" Mr. Quelch did not seem to understand.

" Harvey and Tinson's—your employers," said Mrs. Leleu. " Don't you know their names?"

" We always speak of the firm as Tinsons," replied Mr. Quelch readily.

" Still do business in the same place?" went on Mrs. Leleu.

" Oh yes." The answer was put, but in his heart Mr. Quelch cursed his carelessness in forgetting to ask Mr. Tinson his office address.

" Essex Street, Strand?" Mrs. Leleu inquired carelessly.

How should he answer? While Mr. Quelch paused in cautious doubt, Hubert blurted out—

" Mr. Tinson's place is in Lincoln's Inn Fields. I've heard Carys fort say so."

Had Mrs. Leleu laid a trap for him? If so, why? Did she suspect him to be other than he pretended? He feared so, from the angry way in which she took up Hubert.

"See here ; don't poke yourself into other people's talk, Hubert Podifat, or you may go short at supper."

"I shall have to be on my guard with this woman," said Mr. Quelch to himself ; and he soon left the table to rejoin Mr. Tiuson in the library.

"Mrs. Leleu?" said the lawyer, in answer to his clerk's suggestion that the housekeeper seemed suspicious. "Only inquisitive. All women are. But I'm not much afraid of her. It's Gibbings you must be careful with, the Colonel's man ; he's still here, I find."

Mr. Quelch saw nothing of Gibbings that evening, but Mrs. Leleu was waiting to show him to his room.

"I hope you'll be comfortable here, Mr. Quelch," said the housekeeper, holding up the lighted candle while he lit his own. "My lady wished it. Anything we can do? One of the maids would have unpacked your valise for you, but it was locked."

"Thank you," said Mr. Quelch, producing his keys. "But I always prefer to do that myself."

"Good night, then, Mr. Quelch. Our regular breakfast is at eight, but you can choose your own time. I think everything is all right here," and she waved the candle round, ending the movement close to Mr. Quelch's face. "Good night."

"That woman's on the alert for some reason or other; but I trust I'm a match for her."

And with this consoling reflection Mr. Quelch turned into bed.

He was up with the lark next morning; the bright summer's sun aroused him early, and he was glad to be out and about before the whole house was stirring.

A very short toilet sufficed. He tumbled into his clothes, gave one look in the glass, one touch with the hair-brush—of the greasy black pomatum sold as infallible by the Market Reepham hairdresser—to renew the freshness of his glossy black curls, and then he was ready.

When he returned an hour or two later to dress more carefully he had explored the greater part of the grounds; had learned how the land lay, the position of the offices, stables, and so forth, and had looked through the principal rooms on the ground-floor, still in the hands of the housemaids.

To his surprise he found his own bedroom door ajar. He thought he had locked it. At any rate, he had put away the tell-tale hair-dye; at least he was sure of that.

They were making his bed, he supposed. A figure, a female figure, was stooping over it, as he entered, and a second glance satisfied him it was Mrs. Leleu.

At this moment the housekeeper, unconscious of Mr. Quelch's return, came from the bedside. She was moving towards the window, and closely, minutely examining the pillow she was carrying as she went.

Mr. Quelch instantly knew why. His heart gave a great jump, and he realized that his secret was in this woman's hands.

The pillow-case was marked and stained with greasy black patches just where the sleeper's head had lain.

"You should have worn a night-cap," said Mrs. Leleu with killing sarcasm, as she looked up and saw the culprit.

"I ought, I admit, and in future I will. I feel very foolish, Mrs. Leleu. My vanity has been properly exposed."

"Vanity! Was it only that?" She spoke with scornful disbelief. "No, no; I know better. You're not what you pretend."

"But I assure you—"

"You let the cat out of the bag yourself last night. I saw then your hair was dyed. Who are you? One of the police?"

"I am Mr. Tinson's clerk."

"So's my grandmother. You're wasting breath and time. Why not make a clean breast of it? I might help you."

"My real name is Earswick, I belong to the Thorpeshipe constabulary," the detective confessed, after a very short pause.

"And you are here to get evidence to make up a case against, against—"

She seemed to shrink from mentioning the name.

"Against the person most strongly suspected. Do you know whom I mean?"

"Yes, yes." She hissed out the affirmative with the intense energy of personal hate. "Colonel St. Evelyn. It is he; he did it, the murdering, black-hearted villain that he is. He did it; only he."

"How do you know? Can you tell me anything—anything that will justify arrest, that will help us to convict?"

"I don't know. I may, perhaps. We shall see. But we'll hang him yet—hang him as he so richly deserves." Again fiercest hate gave ghastly meaning to the terrible threat.

Earswick—we will so know him—remembered what Mr. Tinson had said of the enmity between Colonel St. Evelyn and the housekeeper. No doubt Mrs. Leleu might be useful.

"You promise your help, then?"

"Yes; if I have a chance. But you may rely at least upon my holding my tongue. No one shall know who you are through me. But mind others don't find you out."

"No fear; I shan't be caught twice."

"Be on your guard—with Gibbons in particular. He is devoted to his master, so keep him at a distance if you can."

CHAPTER XVII.

TAYLOR'S 'TOXICOLOGY.'

After breakfast Earswick had a few words with Mr. Tinson. The lawyer was on the point of starting for the station to catch the morning express.

"Oho!" he said laughing. "So Mrs. Leleu has penetrated your disguise. Sharp woman. But it don't much matter, and she may be of use. What are your plans?"

"I hardly know; beyond this—that I must hunt up what I can against the Colonel, search his rooms—"

"Mrs. Leleu can help you there."

"And Gibbings; if I can only get the better of him."

"You may; that's your business. But mind what you're about. He's an old soldier and has seen something of the world. Better try the housekeeper first."

Earswick felt the advice was sound, and after parting with Mr. Tinson sought out Mrs. Leleu.

"Well, what can I do for you, Mr. Quelch?" she asked.

"I want to see the house, all parts of it; the young baronet's bedroom, and more especially the Colonel's room."

"Bedroom, or sitting-room?"

"The latter, if he had it to himself. The bedroom of course he would share."

"Yes, he had a private sitting-room—study, it was called, although it was more an office or a den."

"Where is it? I'll go there first."

"Near the front hall. But you'd better wait till you're sure Gibbings is out of the way. If he was to see you fumbling about in the Colonel's room he'd be sure to suspect."

"Confound Gibbings! I must begin with him, then. Where shall I be likely to find him, Mrs. Leleu?"

"In the stables; he's always there about this time. He's the Colonel's stud-groom, you know."

"That's good news. I'm fond of horses myself. Perhaps it will be an introduction;" and so saying the detective went in search of the redoubtable Gibbings, who was found in the yard.

A dapper, light-weight, neatly built man was the Gibbings, rather "horsily" dressed, in Newmarket jacket, breeches, and gaiters, white scarf, and horse-shoe pin. He had greyish, close cut hair, short whisker, and clean-shaved upper lip under his rather prominent bird-like nose.

Gibbings wished it forgotten that he had shouldered a musket and served the Queen as one of the rank and file; but he could not divest himself of his soldierly air. He stood straight and erect in the entrance of the hunting stable, giving his orders to the help when obliged to obey.

"Now, my young shaver, put your back into it—more elbow grease," he was saying as Earswick approached to a lad polishing a bit.

"Here you, Jacob!" was his next remark as he stepped into the stall and passed his hand down a horse's legs. "Dy'e call this per work? Them fetlocks are wringir' wet still. You leave them like that again and I'll wheel you into line."

"How's Corporal Major?" he went on. "Let's look at that eye in the open." Dick led him out into the yard, and Gibbings followed the horse into the daylight without noticing Earswick.

In the yard Gibbings took hold of the horse's head, and having removed a bandage, narrowly examined the horse's right eye.

"More specks; another attack of inflammation, I'm afraid. Worse luck."

"A case of 'lunatic eye,' eh?—returns with every moon," suggested Earswick.

"Halloa! where did you drop from?" Gibbings asked, turning quickly. "What do you know about it? Who are you? What do you call yourself?"

"I'm Stephen Quelch, Mr. Tinson's clerk."

"That don't qualify you as a vet. What do you know about horses?"

"A thing or two. I served my time with a farrier before I studied law, and liked it better. Let's look at his eye."

Earswick's examination was long and minute.

"You may save it. He's a young one. What are you doing for him? Bleeding? Are his stables clean and cool?"

"Might be better, perhaps. We're thinking of cutting away the law,—you see it protrudes."

"Don't do it—on no account; it will only blind the horse. No; sweeten his stable, or move him if you can. Plenty of mild exercise, and above all a good lotion always to the eye. Goulard water, or vinegar and water; they're both used."

"We've a lotion of our own, prepared from the Colonel's own prescription; makes it up himself."

"He knows, does he?"

"Ought to, from the times he's been at at. And so do you, seemingly. Not that you look to know much about a horse."

"Looks don't count," said Earswick, laughing. "This is the right rig for Lincoln's Inn. They wouldn't stand a down-the-road come and a wisp of straw in the mouth there."

"You've not been always at that game, I understand you to say?"

"Not I. I was in a sporting stable first, then I took to doctoring homes. I've seen a thing or two."

"Ain't much to choose, I daresay, between a real 'leg' and a limb of the law."

"The law could give the ring half a stone and walk away from them. I've seen some rare plants in my time."

Gibbings looked at him and winked. Mr. Quelch began to interest him. Here was a man with experience he liked to hear.

"If you've an eye for a horse, you may like to see our lot," said the Colonel's man civilly, as he led the way back to the stable.

This was a fine chance for Earswick, a long step towards that intimacy he wished to establish. Before he parted with Gibbings they had agreed to discuss a cool tankard together at the "Cow and Calf" that afternoon.

THE WRONG ROAD.

66

"I shall be done long before then," said Gibbings; "but I've got a job in Market Reepham that'll keep me till dinner-time. See you again."

And with that the man went away, leaving Earswick to return to the Hall and seek out Mrs. Leleu.

"Now's my time," he said to her quickly. "You promised to show me all over the house. Gibbings has gone to the town, and I shall have a clear hour or more. Take me to the Colonel's study."

The room, as Earswick found, scarcely deserved its name; it had been a sort of business or justice room in Sir Percy Lezaire's time, handy to the front door, where the late baronet saw bailiff or keeper, or, on emergency, members of the county constabulary.

Its position had recommended it to the Colonel, who kept there his gaiters and hobnailed boots, his spud and hunting-crop, and a very comfortable pair of slippers. Other marks of his occupancy were to be seen in the gun-cases, old Indian friends with strange addresses on them; in the fishing-rods, gaff, and nets; in the pipes and boxes of cigars.

Over the mantelpiece hung a few prints; one represented officers and men in the full uniform of the Royal Rangers, his old regiment. The rest were portraits of famous racehorses, West Australian, Will Dayrell, and Genghis Khan, an Arab he had himself owned at Masulipatam.

"I may be here some little time, Mrs. Leleu. Perhaps you'd better leave me."

"Mind Gibbings don't—"

"He shan't catch me here," said Earswick, with confidence; but after it

when Mrs. Leleu had left him he was careful to lock the door.

"Now where shall I begin?" said the detective, looking round. "This is his own private room, much as when he left it, I should sate, it has he about been doing, eh?"

"What sort of man was the Colonel? A sportsman, clearly. the bo
man of business? H—m, well, yes; these papers are not until He
they are docketed and arranged all of them as they should betwe
Methodical, I should say, and regular."

"Books? Not over-fond of reading, I take it, although this v
called his study. Studied Ruff mostly, I expect—I see he has the co
complete set there—and books upon horse-doctoring and dogs." darks
There was a bookcase in one corner of the room, which Mr. E
wick was examining as he talked to himself—an old-fashioned bo
case, with glass doors above and a cupboard below.

Neither was locked, and after taking down a few of the books
the shelves, Earswick opened the cupboard and looked in.
A heap of old rubbish; piles of sporting papers long since ou
date, cartridge cases, a whip-lash, a pair of rusty spurs, and o
nondescript odds and ends.

Nothing worth looking at, surely. But it was his duty to exa
everything, to lose no chance, to leave no stone unturned; and
drugged out the whole contents of the cupboard into the light.

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It was at the very last, on the bottom shelf, and underneath, that he extracted a book, a nearly new book, bound in green cloth, its pages not entirely cut, with all the appearance of having been scarcely read or little used.

"How came it here? By accident or design? What is it called?"

And he opened it at the title-page almost carelessly, then gave a sudden start.

"Struck oil, by jove! There's something in this, or I'm a Dutchman. 'Taylor on Toxicology,' a new book on poisons, hidden away in the Colonel's room!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE.

The discovery Earswick had made in the Colonel's study seemed sufficiently important to warrant closer investigation.

That a work on poisons should be found at the Hall just now was a curious, nay, a suspicious circumstance. It became doubly so when the place and manner of the discovery were considered.

"How came it here?" said the detective, as he drew a chair to the window and sat down to think, still holding the volume in his hand. "Was it concealed purposely, or carelessly thrown aside?

"If the former, why not destroyed? burnt, for instance, it would have been effectually hidden then. Or was it forgotten, overlooked,

as it had served the purpose for which it had been procured?

"That brings me to why he got it, and when. Before or after the

murder? If the former, he bought it to further the deed; if the latter, it was mere curiosity—perhaps he wanted to read up something

as to what he had done that had done such terrible mischief.

"Will it be possible to fix the date of purchase, I wonder? Does

the book itself tell anything?"

He began now to examine it more closely; a thick, squat, small volume, bound in green cloth, evidently new or nearly so, many of its pages still uncut.

"No trace of where it was bought?" he went on, looking inside the cover, where booksellers usually put their address labels and

tags. "They might have been removed; or was it got second-

hand at some bookstall? It looks rather too fresh for that; how-

ever, no knows.

"Uncut in parts? What parts are cut? The index, that of

the book; and as I live! the pages dealing with arsenic. Then the

book must have been bought in connection with the crime. But

one unturned; and

is :—

" 'Arsenic is the bungler's poison, likely to be used by the illiterate and uninformed. The symptoms it produces are so plain, the traces it leaves so unmistakable, that only a clumsy criminal would use it to destroy human life.'

" Did he read those words, I wonder. How would they affect him? If he saw them first when the deed was already done, it would lead him to fix the crime on some one in a lower class. The same argument applies, and with greater force, if he read the book before the murder. It would suggest to him an easy method of shifting suspicion from himself.

" This brings me back to where I started. I must and will discover from whom the book was first purchased."

He was still sitting by the window which commanded the drive as far as the Lodge gates.

" By Jove, there's Gibbings! Back already! He must not find me here." And the detective sprang to his feet, closing the book with a bang.

The action sent a small scrap of paper flying into the air. It must have been lying between the pages.

Earswick stooped to pick it up, and slipping it into his waistcoat-pocket hastily quitted the room.

He went up-stairs to his own quarters, meaning to put the book on poisons in some safe place, and with this idea locked it up in his portmanteau. Then he sat down, and fingering his waistcoat-pocket almost mechanically, extracted the bit of paper.

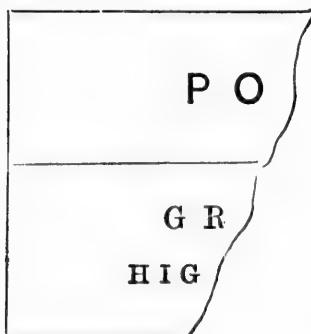
" It may have some value, considering where I found it," he said as he looked at it.

More indeed than he had supposed.

It was only a morsel of paper, but it had a peculiar significance, a meaning all its own.

Earswick knew at a glance that he had come from a chemist's shop. There was not a doubt of that. It was a bit of blue paper such as chemists use to envelop their drugs, and there was still sticking to it a portion of the label and address.

Its exact shape and appearance, with the letters still legible, are reproduced below.



"Luck indeed!" cried the detective, more and more elated, as he scrutinized this tell-tale fragment more and more closely. "Little doubt that I shall make a good job of this now. Any one can see what this paper once contained. PO in red letters are clearly those of the warning label POISON, that every chemist is bound by law to affix to what he sells. Below, GR are the initial letters of that chemist's name; he lived in High Street somewhere, that is equally plain. A little patience will certainly bring me to that chemist's door—if I have to search the whole of the archives of the Pharmaceutical Society! but, please goodness, a country directory will suffice.

"That will keep, however, till later in the day. Let me consider first what this new discovery means."

He walked up and down his room slowly, pondering on what had occurred.

"I have no doubt now that the book was bought before the murder. It was a stepping stone leading straight to the crime. The scent is weak, perhaps, but we are on the trail. I must have more evidence, of course, to run the Colonel in; it will have to be proved that he administered the drug—not necessarily proved, but at least strongly presumed, and I am far from that still, although I begin to have no moral doubt who did the crime. If I can only bring home the purchase of this arsenic to him, or connect it in any way with that which caused Sir Carysfort's death!"

After more deep cogitation, Earswick prepared to leave his room.

"I suppose nothing was found in the young baronet's bedroom; I wonder whether it was searched? A little late in the day perhaps; still I ought to look into this."

And with this idea he again went to the housekeeper.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Leleu, curious as to the result of his investigations in the Colonel's study.

"Nothing much." The detective had already learned the lesson of caution, and talked as little as possible of the progress he made, even to a possible ally and friend. "At any rate, Gibbings came back, and I thought it better to make tracks. But there is something else you promised me."

"I'll be as good as my word. What was it?"

"Can I see the young baronet's bedroom now? The one in which he died, I mean."

"Why, surely! You will just have time before dinner." And Mrs. Leleu led the way to the first floor.

The bedchamber in which the last painful scene had been enacted was locked; it had been shut up entirely since the funeral.

The housekeeper opened the door, then stepped to the window to draw up the blinds.

"Is the room just as it was?" asked Earswick, looking round.

"Pretty nearly. But of course it's been thoroughly cleaned."

"Ah! I thought so. I can't have it all my own way," said the detective half to himself, with a vexed, disappointed air.

"You couldn't expect the place to be left as it was—after a death, too?"

"Who cleaned the room? One of the maids?"

"Simpson, the second housemaid."

"I should like to see her, to ask her a few questions."

"Won't I do? I was with her all the time."

"Were you, Mrs. Leleu? That's better. What was done?—carpet up?"

"No; only swept with tea-leaves."

"Which were thrown away?"

"Naturally, on to the dust-heap; we couldn't keep them."

"Was the bed moved?"

"Yes, and the whole of the furniture."

"Even to this waste-paper basket?" said the detective, pointing to one which stood near the fireplace, and which was by no means empty.

"Well, no. Now you ask me, I believe that basket was forgotten; how or why I cannot say."

He had not listened to more than the first few words, but had swooped instantly down upon the waste-paper basket, the contents of which he at once emptied upon the dressing-table. Then he went through the whole of the rubbish, carefully examining every atom of refuse, every scrap of paper, one by one, till he had considerably diminished the heap.

Only at the last was his patience rewarded, and he came upon two more scraps of blue paper, identical, as he fondly hoped, with that he had discovered in Taylor's "Toxicology."

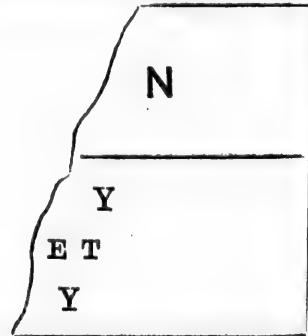
"I shall want to go to the dust-heap by-and-by," he said.

"You do your work thoroughly, and no mistake. Nasty work too. I take it. I'm glad I don't earn my living that way. But you had better have your dinner first, or the smells might do you harm."

"I will just step up-stairs to wash my hands, and then be with you, Mrs. Leleu."

The detective wanted another five minutes to compare the fragments last found with the first.

Both were of the same color, but only one bore any portion of the printed label, the end evidently, as the letters plainly showed:—



"N, in red ink, the last letter of poison. Y, the last letter of the chemist's name. How long a name, I wonder? Three red letters intervening, ISO. Not a very long name, at any rate. There are the two last letters also of street, but only the final letter of the town or place. Not much to go upon, but enough, I hope, even if the dust-heap yields no treasures."

The dinner was much the same as the previous meals. Mrs. Leleu did the honors hospitably; and the loutish Podifat slouched in as usual when the others had half done.

"We will go now to the dust-heap," said Earswick, after Podifat had left the room.

"I'll show you where it is, if you wait till I put a bonnet on; but you can't expect me to be raking and routing in such filth. I should lose all my authority in this house if I were seen there by the maids."

"No one will see us now; the servants are at dinner."

"Well, well; have your own way." And Mrs. Leleu escorted the detective to the outer yard, where the tubs containing the pig's-wash was kept and all the household refuse was thrown.

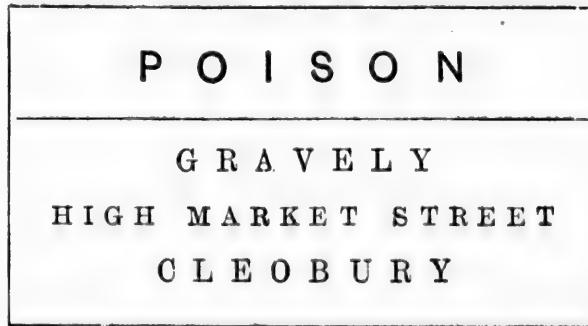
Here she left him, and Earswick, who had armed himself with a garden-rake, stoutly attacked a heap in one corner which Mrs. Leleu had indicated as that most likely to contain the sweepings of the up-stair rooms.

No dustman or *chiffonier* could have turned over the uninviting mass more delicately or with greater patience and care. But Earswick raked out more than half the rubbish before he came upon what he sought.

There they were, however, at last; many more scraps of the same bright blue paper, damp and mildewed by their contact with the moist leaves, but still perfectly recognizable. He picked them up, four or five, as eagerly as a gold-digger or diamond-seeker the last product of repeated washings. Holding them gingerly in the hollow of his hand he once more regained his room.

Amongst the pieces picked up on the dust-heap was that containing the centre of the torn label, and he could now supply the missing letters.

Putting the whole together, the label read as follows:—



"That's splendid! Before the day is out I will know who it was that bought the poison."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHEMIST OF CLEOBURY.

CLEOBURY was a village, or something more, lying a dozen miles from Straddlethorpe, on the opposite side from Market Reepham. Earswick knew it perfectly well, although his police duties had never taken him in that direction. It was on the railway, on the branch line that ran from Market Reepham to the Wolds. This line was that which served Straddlethorpe, but the station was a mile or more from the Hall. The detective, eager to follow up the scent already so warm, was all impatience to pay a visit to the chemist's, but he remembered his engagement to drink a pot of ale with Gibbings at the village public that afternoon.

"What shall I tell him," thought Earswick. "That I am called away on business? He might want to accompany me, and that would be awkward. At the same time, I must not throw him over — he may be of use to me. I shall want to know more about the Colonel, perhaps, and it won't do to quarrel with the man yet. I suppose I had better keep my appointment with Gibbings, and go to Cleobury later in the day."

Accordingly he strolled over to the "Cow and Pail" about three o'clock, where he found his friend.

"Thought you weren't coming," said Gibbings after doing the honors.

"I'm on a long job, and the governor would cut up rough if it weren't done in time; he's a tight hand. Is yours?"

"What! the Colonel? Easy as a glove while you run his way."

"Have you been with him long?"

"Nigh upon nineteen years. He picked me out as his batman when I was only a raw recruit, and I have stuck to him ever since. He's been a good master to me, and I like his ways."

"A sportsman, eh?"

"I believe you. He's a fine judge of a horse, and loves them as I do."

"Races? Bets?"

"We've been upon the turf, him and me, from the time we lay at Bareilly with the old corps. He had a Pegu pony there that nothing could touch, and we owned the famous Arab, Genghis Khan — you may have heard of him — that upset all the pots at Madras."

"Does he own any race-horses now?"

"Not at present," said Gibbings, implying that the Colonel might some day have a stable second to none. "Now we've come into our money perhaps —"

"The Colonel's richer than he was, then?"

"Why, you ought to know that. Don't his missis come in for all this?"

And Gibbings waved his hand towards the fields, every acre of which belonged to Straddelethorpe.

"Yes, but there are such things as settlements. Perhaps the property's tied upon her and her chicks."

"Anyhow he'll have the control of the income, a good round sum; and he'll spend it, too, like a prince. He wanted it."

"What! The Colonel was a little short of cash, eh?"

"It ain't my business to talk over my master's affairs, but I know he dropped on the Two Thousand, and he's got a heavy book for the Leger."

"The only books he cares about, I take it."

"You're right there. The Colonel's not what you call a studious character. I never knew him read much but Ruff, or 'Youatt on the Horse.'"

"He's a bit of a horse-doctor, I think you said?"

"I'll back his recipes against any in the kingdom. He makes them up himself."

A sudden qualm seized Earswick. What if the arsenic had been bought as stable medicine?

"Secrets, eh?" asked the detective. "You couldn't tell a friend what he uses?"

"I couldn't, for I don't know. But I could let you have any to try; I generally keep some of each."

Earswick thanked Gibbings cordially, and noted the offer as one that might still serve in the inquiry.

They gossiped on for half an hour more, exchanging ideas upon stable management, racing scandals, and the straightest tips.

At last Earswick got up saying—

"I must go back to my papers. Worse luck!"

"Shirk 'em," said Gibbings. "Come alongg with me. I'm going to exercise the horses; you shall have a mount."

"Wish I could, but I daren't. Ta, ta!" and Earswick returned to the Hall.

His talk with Gibbings had been distinctly useful to him. Much light had been let in on the Colonel's ways, and something more than a hint of impecuniosity had been thrown out, suggesting, if not absolutely supplying, a motive for the crime.

"If I can only tumble upon something at the chemist's," said Earswick. "I'll go there now, only I must let Gibbings clear out first."

And he stood by the window, watching the grooms ride away with their string of horses. Then he put on his hat and walked over to Straddelethorpe station.

It was still daylight when he reached Cleobury. Five minutes' walk brought him to the straggling hamlet, consisting of little more than one long street, extending to either side of the central market square.

On one side of this, just opposite a decrepit equestrian statue that might have been Julius Cæsar or George I., was the chemist's shop of which he was in search.

Mr. Gravely, whose name appeared in large letters over his shop-front, stood behind the counter,—a short-sighted, nervous little man, whose freckled face turned pale at the first abrupt question asked by the detective—

"Do you keep a poison-book as required by the statute?"

"Poison-book?" repeated the chemist in an agitated voice, as if anticipating trouble.

"Precisely; to register the sale of all poisons. You are wondering, perhaps, why I ask. I am a police officer; here is my card. Be careful."

"I am sure I have no wish to be otherwise. I am most willing to help the law," said Mr. Gravely, bowing humbly and rubbing his hands,

"Then let me see the book—if you have one. If you haven't, you will get into trouble."

"But indeed I have. I am bound to observe the statutes. Here it is."

Earswick drew a stool to the counter, and quickly turned over the leaves of the ledger. He began with the last entry, and followed with his finger every other for many pages back.

Suddenly he stopped with a cry of satisfaction.

"Here it is; his own name too. What a double-dyed egregious fool! But I suppose he could get it on no other terms."

"Look at this, please," he went on, addressing the chemist. "Do you recollect the circumstances under which this entry was made?"

"That? Certainly," replied the chemist, reading the entry aloud from a form, of which the following is an exact copy:—

Date.	Drug.	Quantity.	Purpose.	Signature.	Witness.
188- 29 April	Arsenic	½ drachm	Horse medicine	F. St. Evelyn	H. Gravely.

"You sold this quantity of arsenic to the person who signed for it?"

"Person? Why, of course. It was Colonel St. Evelyn, of Straddlethorpe Hall."

"You are certain of that? You knew him?"

"To be sure. Everybody knows Colonel St. Evelyn. He has not been long in the county, but he goes about a good deal."

"And the witness knew him? But how do you explain this? H. Gravely, that is your name. You are not competent as a witness. The law required some second person to whom the buyer was known as well as to you."

"It was my son; he has the same name as myself."

"Is he here? Call him."

"My son has gone to Market Reepham; but I will send him over to you if you wish."

"I presume that, like yourself, he could identify the purchaser as Colonel St. Evelyn?"

"Oh, of course," said the chemist, but rather doubtfully.

"You would lay yourself open to a very serious charge if you sold poison to a person you did not know: I suppose you are aware of that?"

"Oh, but I knew him. It was in the dusk, but I knew him—a dark, sharp-speaking, military-looking gentleman,—there was no mistaking him."

"In the dusk, eh? About what time?"

"About seven, I should say."

"How did he come? Ride or drive?"

"Neither; he walked. At least I saw no horse or cart at the door."

"No doubt he walked," said Earswick to himself. "It would attract least attention. If he had ridden or driven, there would have been the groom or the horse to hold."

"He was alone?" was the detective's next question, addressed to the chemist.

"I am sure of that; quite alone."

"And do you remember how he was dressed?"

"Yes, I think so. The Colonel had on a rather peculiar cloak, made loose. They call them by some Scotch name—macintosh?"

"A waterproof, then?"

"I don't think so."

"Perhaps it was an ulster?"

"That's Irish."

"Well, an Inverness?"

"That's the name. I remember now. It was made of Scotch plaid, big pattern, yellowish, with red lines."

"Rather staring in fact."

"That's what I thought of it, and how I remember it so well."

"And you would know it again?"

"Yes, I could swear to it."

"And the wearer?"

"Him to. I should know his voice and his way."

"Well, Mr. Gravely, I won't conceal from you that what you have told me is of the utmost importance. You may have heard what has happened at the Hall?"

"I saw it in the papers. But—" a light seemed to break in on the chemist suddenly—"you cannot mean to say that the Colonel's suspected."

"What do you say to this?" replied Earswick sternly, putting his finger on the poison-book. "It's quite incomprehensible to me why you have not come forward before this. You knew as we all did that poor young Sir Carysfort had been poisoned by arsenic, and

yet you have volunteered no information of what you had sold. You will have to explain this, I promise you."

"I had quite forgotten it, I assure you."

"That's hard to believe."

"Well, I won't say that it didn't cross my mind; but dear, dear, was I to go and accuse the Colonel, his own brother-in-law? Besides, he said he wanted it for his horses—it's entered soth ere."

"You have a confiding disposition, Mr. Gravely," said the detective, "and I warn you, you will have to justify all this to the proper authorities. I don't suppose you want to be taken up as an accomplice."

"Gracious heavens! don't hint at such a thing." The little chemist was trembling in every limb.

"Well, it's quite on the cards, and it will all depend on how you conduct yourself."

"I'm sure I am ready to do anything, everything required."

"It is in the first place essential that you should hold your tongue; you must preserve the most absolute secrecy about this."

"I promise, sir—I promise."

"And you must give up this register to me. There must be no risk of losing it—it is far too important in the case."

"How about my regular work, sir? I shall want that ledger."

"Open another; I must have this. Let me see now," and Earswick walked once or twice round the shop. "Is there anything else to be said or done? No; I think not. I will not trespass on your time any further, Mr. Gravely, except to repeat my cautions. Be circumspect and silent, or you may get into serious trouble."

With this rather threatening farewell, the detective put the poison register under his arm, and retraced his steps to Cleobury station.

CHAPTER XX.

A CLOAK, COAT, OR CAPE.

ONE or two doubtful points served to embitter Earswick's joy as he traveled back to Stradklethorpe that evening.

There was first the possibility that some one—the real criminal, and for his own guilty purpose—had personated Colonel St. Evelyn at Cleobury.

Was this possible? was it probable? The answer was surely in the negative.

How could the chemist, Mr. Gravely, a neighbor in the county be mistaken in his man? He had declared that he knew and recognized the Colonel.

"But not too positively. I fancied I detected an accent of doubt in his words. He was a poor creature at best—broke down almost

with me. What would he do in the witness-box? Suppose he had been wrong after all?

"There is the signature, though. That may help. I must compare it with another, a certainly genuine signature; I shall be sure to find one among the papers Mr. Tinson left.

"And the description—the *signalement*—that will be hard to get over. The Inverness cape or cloak was a remarkable object in its way; I ought to be able to trace that to its rightful owner.

"On the other hand, there is the ostensible purpose for which the drug was bought—horse medicine. Now I know from Gibbings that the Colonel made up his receipts. Shall I be able to ascertain what these contained? Gibbings promised to let me have some of the stuff. I must, if possible, get one of each kind, and have them analyzed. There bound to tell some story—one way or the other."

In his eagerness, Earswick almost ran to the library on his return to the Hall.

To give color to the detective's occupation, a number of documents—law papers, leases, and so forth—had been left by Mr. Tinson. These lay on the library table, where Earswick sat and worked when not otherwise employed.

"If I remember right," the detective said as he seated himself at this table, "the Colonel signed that surrender of the Doddington lease. I had it in my hands this morning. Ah! here it is."

He untied the red tape and opened out the great formal parchment, engrossed in the customary copperplate. At the end of it was the signature he sought.

To take the chemist's poison register from his pocket, open it at the suspicious entry, and compare the two signatures, was the work of a moment for the detective.

"The same!" he cried—"absolutely and identically the same! There can be little doubt now that it was the Colonel himself who bought the stuff. Some one else might have personated him, but surely no one could have counterfeited his hand.

"That disposes pretty well of my difficulty as to identity. And I shall still have as a second string the testimony of the cloak, coat, or cape. I must find that cloak, coat, or cape, or at any rate get evidence that the Colonel owned and wore one.

"How can I best manage this? Gibbings? He would know, of course; but how am I to ask him about his master's clothes? It would be most imprudent at this stage. There's Mrs. Leleu; of course I don't want her to know exactly what I'm at, still I ought to be able to get out of her what I want, if I go the right way to work."

After this very adroitly led the conversation in the necessary direction. Mrs. Leleu, now that the detective was playing with his cards on the table, was ready enough to talk to him on any subject, but especially about the Colonel.

"Did you see much of him?" asked the detective.

"More than I cared about. He was always messing about, interfering with other people's work."

"What! in the house? I thought his tastes were mostly outdoor."

"That of course; but nothing came amiss to him, if he had a chance of ordering other people about, hectoring here, and bullying here, and poking his nose in everybody's business."

"I wonder he found time. He looked after the estate, didn't he?"

"I believe you. Ask the bailiff, or the farmers, or the laborers. He was always ranging up and down, finding fault, and pretending to teach every one his business."

"I suppose he was fond of exercise."

"He must have been, or else it was his unquiet spirit, for he never seemed to rest; out in all weathers too."

"Ah!" Earswick saw an opening at last. "I wonder he didn't take cold. You wouldn't have been sorry, I daresay."

"Him take cold? Never. He's too hard. Besides, he looked after himself too well for that."

"Wrapped up warm on cold days, eh?"

"I should think so. Why, he had coats for all weathers, all thicknesses, all sorts and shapes."

"A wise man. In a changeable climate like this, the same top-coat don't do for two days running, as I've found before now. I'd like to get a wrinkle from the Colonel."

"Get Gibbings to show you his wardrobe, then."

"I'd like to, if I thought it was safe. What I want is something loose to go over another coat—a thing you could throw off and on easily."

"I've seen the Colonel in something of the sort; what they call an Inverness, I think."

"Have you, now?" Earswick tried hard to assume indifference as he drew near the point at which he had aimed. "What kind was it? What stuff? What color?"

"Oh, I can't tell. Scotch, I should say; a tartan or a plaid. Rather staring pattern; drab, or rather yellow, with bright red lines."

"That would hardly do for me. I should be known by my coat, as I daresay the Colonel was."

"It's likely enough. He was fond of that coat; I have seen him in it dozens of times."

Earswick was delighted. He had come upon just what he wanted.

"Well, anyway, I'll get Gibbings to show it me, if it's only to get a pattern of the shape."

"I wouldn't do anything of the kind, if I were you. He'd only suspect something."

"Perhaps you are right. I'd best leave it and him alone," said the detective; and soon after he bade the housekeeper good night.

But he had no intention of dropping his friend Gibbings, and re-

lying upon his own acumen and discretion, trusted still to turn him to profitable account.

They did not meet again till next morning, when Earswick found him as usual at the stables.

"You promised yesterday to let me have some of your stable specifics—the Colonel's prescriptions I mean," said the detective, after he had inquired in due form about the sick horse, and had examined the other occupants of the stalls.

"Right you are. But why do you want them?"

"I still do a little veterinary work at odd times, and I'm always willing to learn. Now if these medicines are worth anything —"

"There's nothing like them, take my word for that. I've tried them this many a year, and the Colonel, he believes in them too."

"Perhaps some day he'll give me the receipts himself."

"I doubt that; he keeps them even from me. But don't let that put you out. You can always have what you want if you write me a line."

"You shan't lose by it."

"Oh, come! Between friends, you know."

"They will be worth money to me, and you ought to have your share. Why, if I were you I'd turn a pretty penny. Get the Colonel to supply the goods and you sell them."

"I don't think I'll do that. He might not like it, and I'd be sorry to vex him. I don't mind obliging you; that's another pair of shoes."

"Well, when can I have them?"

"Why, now if you choose. There's only half-a-dozen of them. Come this way, into the harness-room."

"Fere you are," went on Gibbings, taking down a bottle or two and some tin boxes.

"These are the cordial balls; I never knew their equal after a hard day's hunting. These are the cough balls, and this embrocation never fails. There's some of the eye-water, some fever powders, and some for worms. Now you are fitted out with the whole biling."

Earswick was profuse in his thanks.

"I tell you what it is Mr. Gibbings, you are a real downright tramp; if there's anything I can do for you just say the word. And look here, it's my turn to stand treat. Shall we meet again at the 'Cow and Pail'?"

"I'm your man. But it must be late; I've got enough to keep me busy till night."

So had Earswick. Returning to the house with his medicines, he regained his room, and there made the whole into a safe and convenient parcel. Then, without another word to a soul in the Hall, took the next train from Straddie Thorpe into Market Reepham.

Arrived at the county town, he went to a quiet public not far from

the police station, and sent a message round to the chief constable. Captain Bracebridge came at once to hear what his subordinate had to say.

"I thought it better, sir, to report in person," said Earswick. "I have come upon some important facts, as I think you will agree." And then the detective detailed the steps he had taken, and the success that had attended them.

"You are on the right line, I haven't a doubt of that. And the case looks blacker than ever against the Colonel."

"Is the evidence strong enough to convict, sir?"

"It's purely circumstantial, of course, and juries are difficult to deal with; but when you take the whole of the facts together, I don't see how any sensible man could hesitate."

"There's still the question of the cloak. If I can lay my hands on that, and the chemist identifies it, we shall have tangible corroboration on the point of identity."

"I quite agree with you, Earswick. You must lay your hands on that Inverness."

"I will have it, right or wrong. Gibbings shall give it me, or I will take it."

"If the worst comes to the worst, we will get a search-warrant."

"Better try no extreme measures, sir, until fair ones have failed. I am to meet Gibbings to-night; perhaps I shall get the better of him, although he has got a hard head."

"Do you call those fair means?" said the chief constable, laughing. "Fair or foul you should say."

"Well, sir, we police must not be too particular. You tell me to get the cloak, and I must obey your orders."

"You are a promising, painstaking young officer, Earswick, and I am satisfied with you. Have you anything else to say?"

"Only about these medicines. I've brought them over with me; they ought to be analyzed."

"Quite right. It shall be done. We'll send them up to town. Although the evidence they supply will not serve us, unless in the negative way."

"I do not quite follow you, sir."

"Why, you see, they will either be found to contain arsenic, or they won't. If they do, then there is the explanation of the purchase and use of the poison."

"Of course; I understand. While if they don't——"

"The arsenic was bought for some other purpose."

"Excellently reasoned, sir."

"But the evidence, if it is that way, is only negative at best."

"Yes, sir; but, as you have said, when taken in connection with all the other facts——"

"It will weigh with the jury, there's no doubt of that. So don't be cast down, but go on as you have begun, Earswick; you may hit on still more."

And with this the chief and his lieutenant separated, Earswick returning without delay to the Hall.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CASE IS CLEAR.

THE bar parlor of the "Cow and Pail" was a snug little place, to which Mr. Gibbings, as one of the upper servants at the Hall, was always welcome. His friend Mr. Quelch was equally welcome, more especially as he gave a liberal order for drink.

"What's your weakness, Mr. Gibbings?" asked the detective. "Beer sits cold on the stomach this time of night. Shall we say whisky hot, or rum?"

"There's nothing like old Jamaica if you get it sound. Tain't bad here, although it might be older. They spoiled us for rum in the Crimea."

"You were there, were you?"

"At the end of the siege, yes—before we went to the 'Shiny.'"

"'Shiny'?"

"Yes, the 'Shiny East': that's our soldier's name for India."

"Was the Colonel in the Crimea too?"

"He was that. I went to him there as batman. He picked me out, as I think I told you, chiefly, I believe, because we were much of a size."

"You and the Colonel? What would that matter?"

"A good deal to both of us. You see I could wear his old things; that saved his pocket, and I got the clothes."

"Economical that. And does the arrangement still continue?"

A new feature was suddenly introduced into the inquiry. For the first time it occurred to Earswick that Gibbings might have personated the Colonel. What if the master had sent his man to Cleobury? The detective made a note of this new suspicion, the effect of which was to include Gibbings as an accessory, and to call for special observation of the servant.

"Well, yes, in a way: although nowadays I get a couple of new suits a-year, I still have the pick of what the Colonel casts off,—not that I want them much now."

"A nice little perquisite all the same. Anything from a good tailor is worth money. I suppose you know that."

Gibbings winked.

"Next time you come in for a haul you might let me know," said the detective. "I'm obliged to dress smart for Lincoln's Inn, and I can't afford to go to the West End."

"Perhaps we can deal. Is there anything particular you want?"

"Well, I'd be glad of a good topcoat against winter, if you could help me to such a thing."

"What kind? Black cloth?"

"No; something loose that I could throw over another coat and take off when I get to the office. It's precious cold, I tell you, on November mornings. You try walking from Camden Town to Lincoln's Inn about daylight in winter time."

"Well, I'll remember you next time the Colonel overhauls his kit."

"There's nothing you can think of just now? I have to look ahead, you know."

Earswick waited anxiously for the answer to a question that was more important than it seemed.

"Well, there's an old Inverness the Colonel's very fond of; he's had a good deal of wear out of it, and it ought to be coming my way soon."

"Warm, is it, and decent-looking?"

"It's a first-class article. A little loud, perhaps, but warranted to keep out the cold."

"Can I see it?"

"I daresay, if I can lay my hands on it. That reminds me, I haven't seen it myself very lately."

"Perhaps the Colonel's got it with him."

"Not he. I know what he took, for I packed his things. No, it's somewhere in his dressing-room."

"Well, if you think of it—only don't put yourself out of the way," said Earswick, secretly well satisfied with what he heard.

But he made up his mind to know more about that cloak; he would find out for himself, that very night if possible. Why should he not pay a visit to the Colonel's dressing-room? Mrs. Leleu might help him here. The only point was to elude Gibbings, and this would probably be easy. Gibbings himself seemed likely to make it so.

As the evening wore on it was evident that the veteran could not resist the fascinations of his favorite spirit. He might have been weaned on ration rum, as he himself confessed to his entertainer after the fifth tumbler hot; and although as seasoned as such a veteran should be, it was clear as bedtime approached that he had had his allowance and something more.

"I'm fit for picket," he hiccupped as he stood with difficulty on his feet, "but not for guard. Hope they won't nab me at the gate as I pass in."

His mind unshinged was wandering back to barrack-days.

"It is not my first chalk. They'd stop my passes and give me pack-drill. I think I'll stay absent."

"No, no," said Earswick, taking him by the arm. "I'll see you safe home to the Hall."

"Hall?" repeated Gibbings, still bewildered. "The Hall? Why, of course; I forgot. They can't make me a defaulter. 'I care for nobody,' he sang it with maudlin jollity, "'no, not I; and nobody cares for me!'"

"Well, come along; it's getting late," and Earswick helped his companion into the fresh air, the effect of which was to increase rather than diminish his intoxication.

However, with a little trouble, Gibbings was got to the Hall, where Earswick, the butler assisting, put him to bed.

It was still comparatively early, and the detective found Mrs. Leleu still up in the housekeeper's room.

"I want to go to the Colonel's room—his dressing-room I mean."

"What, at this time of night! It would look odd. Suppose Gibbings—"

"Gibbings is in bed; I have just put him there."

"Sober?"

"Well, we won't say too much about that. Anyway, he won't interfere."

"What are you going to do?"

"Overhaul the Colonel's wardrobe. I want to see that coat, the one you were talking about yesterday."

"Hasn't he got it with him abroad?"

"Gibbings said not. But come along, and bring your keys; the wardrobes may be locked."

"I have duplicates if they are," said the housekeeper, as she provided herself with a key-basket and led the way up-stairs.

The dressing-room, which communicated with one of the best bedrooms in the house—that, in fact, to which the St. Evelyns moved on their second day at the Hall—looked a little deserted, as was natural in its occupier's absence. All the dressing appliances had been put away, neat curtains concealed the boot-rack, there were no clothes about, no dressing-gown, no greatcoats hanging behind the doors. Gibbings who personally valeted the Colonel, was of an orderly methodical nature, and he took a pride in the tidiness of his master's room.

Eurswick looked round, noting the various receptacles for clothes. There was a "hanging" cupboard, a double-winged wardrobe, and two chests of drawers. He tried the doors of the wardrobe and all the drawers; nothing was locked except the cupboard, but the key was in the door.

"Can I help?" asked Mrs. Leleu, as she lighted the candles on the dressing-room table.

"Much obliged, but I think not. I like to make my searches myself; I am certain then that nothing's been missed,"—and the police officer proceeded to carry out his investigation in a regular matter-of-fact fashion.

He inspected every drawer in turn, examining the contents with deft nimble fingers like a custom-house searcher. He opened the cupboard and brought a candle to bear on everything that hung therein. He did the same with the wardrobe, and made sure by feeling with his hands that nothing escaped him.

Less than half an hour sufficed to satisfy him of the fruitlessness of his search. There was no Inverness cape of the kind he wanted amongst the Colonel's effects.

"It isn't here," he said to Mrs. Leleu. "Is there nowhere else I can look?"

"Well, there's madam's room—the bedroom, you know. But I don't see how it could get in there."

"I had better look," said the detective. "We musn't do things by halves."

THE WRONG ROAD.

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"I can't think what's come of it," said Mrs. Leleu. "There's the first gun-room, the study, and the hat-stand in the hall; it might be left hanging there, only I think I should have noticed it."

"We will go down-stairs and see for ourselves," said Earswick, hoping in his heart that the cloak might not turn up at all.

Nor did it. There was no trace of it anywhere in the house, and Earswick, remembering Gibbing's assurance that the Colonel had not taken it away with him, was brought naturally to a positive conclusion that it had disappeared.

"I'm glad of it," he said to himself as he went up-stairs to his room. "It's just as it ought to be. Of course he has made away with the cloak; to have left it amongst his things would have been to assist identification.

"The case is pretty well complete, I think, now. I doubt whether I can do much more here, but I had better stay till I get my orders from the chief."

With that he turned in, to sleep the sound satisfied sleep of the man who has done his duty and met his reward.

He was as usual early next morning; the habit had grown upon him since he had joined the force, and he was always up betimes, even when he had no special object to gain.

It was so this morning, and after dressing leisurely he strolled down-stairs, hardly knowing what to do with himself till breakfast-time.

A walk in the park promised to be pleasant, but on his way to the hall door he passed the Colonel's study.

"I might have another look through his room. I was too much excited last time to explore it completely. Who knows but what I might come upon some more evidence! Gibbings is not likely to interrupt me; he cannot have slept off his debauch quite yet. What a head he'll have!"

Earswick entered the room, and after looking round to refresh his memory with its contents, proceeded to examine the contents of the drawers, to overhaul the cupboards of the bookcase, and handle afresh all the books and paper about.

He was so busily engaged with his task that the door opened and some one entered before he was aware of it. It was Gibbings, whose voice, rather brusque and menacing, caused him to turn.

"Holla! my fine fellow, what are you doing here?"

"Why, Mr. Gibbings, is that you?" The detective was slightly disconcerted, and found it difficult to improvise a plausible excuse.

"Did Mr. Timson tell you to take stock of the Colonel's papers?" asked Gibbings, sarcastically.

"Not exactly," stammered Earswick. "I was only looking for something I had missed."

"In here?" asked Gibbings sharply. "Then you have been in here before? I thought as much. You came here to spy and pry, you mean hound."

"Fair and softly, Mr. Gibbings; no hard names."

Earswick was more and more disconcerted. It took him quite aback to find the old soldier thoroughly alert and sensible in spite of his previous night's potations.

"Who are you? I was an ass to trust you without knowing more about you. Do you belong to the police?"

"I have told you who I am."

"Tinson's clerk? That don't gammon me; I know better. You stole a march on me last night, I couldn't for the life of me tell why, but I know now I find you here; it was you who turned over my master's things last night."

"I, Mr. Gibbings?" protested Earswick. "What can you mean?"

"I mean that some strange hand has been meddling and muddling in the Colonel's cupboards and drawers. Things are not as I left them, I could swear to that."

"Have you been to the Colonel's room, then, this morning?"

"I have—where you were last night. Don't deny it? I shan't believe you."

"Upon my word, Mr. Gibbings, you are behaving very strangely. I am here on business."

"Dirty detective business. You'd better clear out. Go back to where you came from before I make you."

Gibbings looked threatening.

"I can take care of myself," replied Earswick, stoutly. "If I couldn't, I could appeal to Lady Lezaire."

"Of course she'd take your part. I know now who set you on. She hates my master, and would do all she could to ruin him."

"In what way?" asked Earswick, innocently.

"Yah! you know. You can't humbug me. You go your way and let me go mine. And see here, your way don't lie this way, so clear out of this double quick, and don't let me catch you in this room again."

Gibbings showed Earswick the door, and following him out, locked it.

"Any one that wants to go in there will have to come to me for the key. Don't you try, neither here nor up-stairs."

Had this stormy *rencontre* occurred even the day before, Earswick would have been greatly disappointed and put out; but, fortunately for his inquiry, he had found out all he wanted before Gibbings cut up rough.

Fortified with this consoling reflection, he again went over to Market Reepham and told the chief constable what had occurred.

"No need to worry more," said Captain Bracebridge. "We have got him in a cleft stick now. I shall apply for a warrant. The case is clear."

CHAPTER XXII.

AT DIEPPE.

THE season begins early at French watering-places; by the end of June it is in full swing, and in the dog-days it is at its height. In the early autumn, when our home resorts are most crowded, the season is already declining in France.

People who love their comfort prefer the early quiet time before the rush—before famine prices set in, and when accommodation is still obtainable in hotels and private houses at comparatively reasonable rates.

No one knew this better than Colonel St. Evelyn, who in his bachelor days had tried all the watering-places on the Normandy coast in turn. It was at Trouville, as we have seen, that he won his bride and established himself in the good graces of the Lezaires. Trouville, always a favorite place, had been doubly dear to him since then, and he would have gladly returned there now until the time was ripe for his return to the Hall.

But tender-hearted Mrs. St. Evelyn could not bear to face the place again. To her its associations were far too painful; her loss was too recent; she could not forget the great gap made in the little family circle since last they were there.

Trouville was impossible, the Colonel readily admitted that. Rachel's will was law to him, as he told her—doubly so in such a matter as this. The sorrow with which she mourned her poor young brother was so deep-seated and sincere, that she deserved to be spared any additional pang.

So they went to Dieppe instead of Trouville, and the Colonel said he liked it better. They were comfortably housed in the Hotel Beau Rivage, facing the green lawn that stretched down to the beach, and in full view of the Channel.

There had been but little reference between husband and wife to the late terrible catastrophe at the Hall. Probable causes had, of course, been discussed; but Rachel, obedient and easily impressed, had quickly accepted the Colonel's interpretation. He had insisted, with a vehemence which was quite as good as logic to her, that Sir Carysfort's death could not possibly be attributed to anything but his own imprudence; it was nonsense, wicked nonsense, to talk of poison. The verdict of the coroner's jury was preposterous and absurd. A sweet simple-minded woman, slow to think evil of any one in the world, Mrs. St. Evelyn was ready enough to accept this explanation. Any other, any that traced the death to some guilty cause, would have been inexpressibly repugnant to her, and would have increased her anguish a thousand-fold.

It was a very peaceful, uneventful, almost monotonous life they led, conforming, outwardly at least, to the ways of the place; taking their meals at the *table d'hôte* hour, lounging lazily upon the shingle under their high-thatched chairs, or listening to the music

of the band. A happy family party, a delightful *menage*, as it seemed to the French visitors; the father's distinguished military air, the graceful childlike mother, the pretty babies, with their sturdy English *bonne*.

Colonel St. Evelyn seldom left his wife's side, except to take the long walks essential to a man of his active habits. He was with her now, smoking the inevitable cheroot, and skimming the day's 'Figaro,' which had just come down from Paris, when his eye fell upon two persons approaching.

"New arrivals," he observed carelessly. "Compatriots, seemingly. The place is filling fast, Rachel."

"Where are they? I don't see them."

"Why, it's—" He checked himself suddenly, adding under his breath as he rose from his seat, "What on earth brings him here?"

"Who is it? Any one you know?" went on Rachel.

"Oh no, dear, nothing of the sort. I am only going to take a turn. I shall find you here, I suppose?"

"Yes, I think so, unless you are very long. But we shall go straight back to the hotel."

Colonel St. Evelyn walked towards the persons he had noticed.

"Surely I am not mistaken," he said, with outstretched hands.

"It is Captain Bracebridge."

The chief constable's response was cold and repellent.

"Yes, Colonel St. Evelyn, I am Captain Bracebridge. I came to Dieppe to take ——"

"To take a holiday, I presume. Well, you deserve it, more than most men."

"Mine is no holiday trip. I'd rather have come on any other."

"Indeed? What ——"

"Colonel St. Evelyn," went on the chief constable, sternly, "it is my painful duty to inform you that I hold a warrant for your arrest."

"Good God! On what charge? You must be mad. Have a care how you exceed your powers."

"I am perfectly in form. The warrant is regular, and I am accompanied by this gentleman"—he pointed to a third person, who stood behind with Earswick—"by the police commissary of Dieppe."

"I protest. There is some terrible mistake. On what charge do you presume to interfere with me?"

"Before I tell you, it is my duty to warn you that anything you may say——"

"Yes, yes, I know the formula. Let us take it as said. What is the charge? Quick! Let me know the worst."

"You are accused of the murder of your brother in-law, Sir Caryfort Lezaire."

"That woman! Has she dared to let her enmity, her hatred, reach such lengths as this?" cried Colonel St. Evelyn, his dark cheek mantling with mingled shame and rage,

"I must again remind you, Colonel St. Evelyn, to be careful what you say. Remember you are in custody."

"What are you going to do with me? My wife is here; she must not know, at least not for the present."

"Will you surrender? will you promise to go with us quietly?"

"Yes; but where? To England?"

"To England; the steamer starts in less than an hour."

"What if I refuse? We are not in England now, remember."

"No, but the law of extradition runs here. Unless you accept my terms unhesitatingly and at once, I must hand you over to this gentleman"—pointing to the French official—"who will lodge you in the local jail. You will have to wait there until we can appear before a *juge d'instruction*, who on my application will hand you over to us. I shall then handcuff you and carry you back a close prisoner."

"The alternative is too terrible, Captain Bracebridge; you are too strong, I submit. My poor Rachel! what will become of her? She must be told; at least some excuse must be made for my sudden departure. Captain Bracebridge, help me! You are a married man, you have children, help me. I am thinking now not of myself, but of her."

"I cannot let you out of my sight. The charge is too grave, the risks too great."

"You need not. Mrs. St. Evelyn is there, not a dozen yards off. Let me go to her. I will say I am summoned suddenly to England."

Captain Bracebridge hesitated, then shook his head.

"Do not refuse me this, I implore you, Captain Bracebridge. You are, like myself, an old soldier; we have both borne the Queen's commission. Let me entreat you—"

"You will make no attempt to escape?" asked the chief constable, beginning to relent.

"I give you my word of honor, as an officer and a gentleman." Captain Bracebridge looked at him, as though surprised that a man over whom such a terrible charge impended should presume to use these words.

"Well, I'll trust you, Colonel St. Evelyn, although I may be exceeding my duty. If you play me false—excuse my saying it—I shall have to appeal to force. The local authorities," he again pointed to the commissary, "will support me."

"There is nothing to fear," said the Colonel, as he walked away to where his wife still sat, unconscious of the grave trouble that had befallen her husband.

"My dear," he began, "you must prepare for a surprise."

"Ferdinand, what has happened? There is something wrong I see it in your face. Mamma?"

"No, no; Lady Lezaire is quite well. But we are wanted back. There are some important matters, with regard to the succession—and others—that must be attended to at once. We must go back to England."

"I'm quite ready, dear. Only, of course, it will take us some days to prepare."

"Yes; and that's why I thought, perhaps, I had better go on ahead—you would not mind?" he asked, anxiously.

"Oh no. I shan't like it, of course, without you. But I can do everything, and there are the servants. But is there such hurry? When would you start?"

"To-day, I think. The mail goes this afternoon. I am anxious there should be no unnecessary delay. The lawyers are very urgent."

"Is it Mr. Tinson? Surely he might have written."

"Mr. Tinson, yes; and your mother, I fear. Lady Lezaire is making difficulties. In your interests, and those of our dear children—"

"Oh, Ferdinand, how good you are! Always thinking of us," said the sweet little wife, with tears of gratitude filling her soft eyes,

"I am ashamed to leave you in the lurch like this—to give you so much trouble, dearest—"

"Never mind me, Ferdinand. I can do everything, I daresay," said Mrs. St. Evelyn. "But you are got going yet?" she went on with a tender desire to procrastinate, seeing her husband turn away.

"As far as the hotel. I must put a few things together; a dressing-bag will do."

"Let me go and help you, Ferdinand. I will see to it all."

Colonel St. Evelyn would not suffer his wife to bother herself, he said. It was no trouble; an old soldier ought to be able to do his own packing.

"And I'll be back directly—to say good-bye," he added cheerily as he walked off, still closely escorted by his friends.

They were more than usually affectionate—his adieux. Mrs. St. Evelyn, easily moved and emotional, wondered at, while she was grateful for, his fond looks, and tender, lingering farewell. She was to join him again within a few short days—why this impressive leave-taking?

There were tears in her eyes and a weight at her heart when he was gone; the gloom and sadness of approaching evil filled her with vague forebodings and nameless fears.

As for St. Evelyn, he carried his head high, walking erect and unabashed between his captors, the two officers of the law, whom the uninitiated might easily have taken for two particularly attentive familiar friends.

Who shall say what grievous thoughts occupied and oppressed him as he made the dreary journey from Dieppe to Market Reepham, from the careless freedom of the gay French watering-place to captivity within the dark and narrow limits of the county jail?

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TRIAL SIDE.

THE news of Colonel St. Evelyn's arrest spread like wildfire through the county. It was the talk of every tongue; common gossip everywhere. But no one exactly knew how or why he had been taken.

Only a paragraph in the local prints gave a brief account of the capture; a mysterious allusion was made to the important clues that had come into the hands of the police, and much vague praise was accorded to Mr. Earswick, of whom the county was told to be proud, as a new and shining light among detectives.

But there was the undoubted fact; the Colonel was in jail. Lord Prudhames had not hesitated to commit his fellow-justice of the peace. There must be sufficient evidence, of course; the case must be perfectly clear, or bail would not have been refused.

"Dear heart! it's not possible; it can't be true," said Major Ruddock, the worthy veteran who owed his position as governor of the jail to this very person whom the chief constable brought there, a prisoner, in the dead of night.

"Read your warrant, Major Ruddock. Lord Prudhames granted it. I give the Colonel's body into your safe-keeping. Remember, you will be responsible for him."

"I need no one to teach me my duty, Captain Bracebridge," replied the jail official, tartly. Major Ruddock was a hard-featured, middle-aged man, with iron-grey moustaches cut short and standing out like stiff quills, a brusque manner, and a grating voice. He had risen from the ranks of the Royal Rangers, and showed it every inch.

"It's all a mistake, of course, Ruddock," the Colonel said pleasantly, as they stood inside the prison lodge, while the governor signed the receipt for the person of his friend and patron.

The chief constable held up a finger menacingly. "Be careful what you say, Colonel St. Evelyn."

"There, take your receipt," said the governor, interposing abruptly. "I daresay, sir"—this to the Colonel—"you'll be glad to get to bed."

"We've been travelling since three, when we left Dieppe, and now it must be—"

"Past eleven," said the governor. "Good night; there's no need to detain you police. I've seen enough of you. I wasn't bound to open to you at all after hours."

"I'm glad you did, Ruddock, or I should have gone to the police lock-up," laughed the prisoner. "A poor place. I'd much rather be your guest."

"Oh, Colonel, I'd give you the best my house contains, but—" he hesitated—"the rules; I must adhere to the rules."

"I would not ask you to break them, you may be sure," said St. Evelyn. "Where are you going to lodge me?"

"On the trial side. In one of the large cells —"

St. Evelyn shuddered, but recovering quickly, cried—

"I know. I've often had worse quarters in barracks when I was a jolly sub. What's the delay? Let's go on there; I want to turn in."

Certain formalities had to be observed. The prisoner was obliged to give up his watch, his rings, his money, his penknife even; the rules were read to him, and his description taken: his name, age, quality and distinctive marks.

"The doctor ought to see you, I suppose, sir; but it's late, and he'll have gone to bed."

"Nonsense, Ruddock! I'm in excellent health. Only give me a mouthful of food and let me turn in."

The governor led the way through the dark and narrow entrance of the jail; a medieval construction, with ponderous gates that closed with a clang, and were secured by vast bolts and massive chains. The interior, dimly lighted, was still as death, only broken by the voice of the night-watchman in slippers, challenging them in low, sepulchral tones. Then they reached the "location" of newly arrived prisoners, his lodging for the night—spacious enough as a cell, but as a bedroom, compared with those of the Hall or hotel, mean and meagre at best. A stone floor, an iron bedstead fastened into the whitewashed wall, a shelf-like table under the gas light, a three-legged stool, a few tin utensils, and that was all.

"Rough, but at any rate clean. I've been worse off in old campaigning days—eh, Ruddock? And so have you."

"Dear heart! Colonel, the pity of it. What can I say? What can I do?"

"Get me some bread and cheese, or cold meat, and a glass of beer—I am allowed one pint, you know, by the regulations."

"You shall have the best that's in my larder, Colonel. I'll fetch it myself," and the staunch old soldier hurried away, to return presently with the materials of a substantial repast.

He waited while the Colonel, with excellent appetite, ate his supper. Then he called in the night-watchman to clear away and make the prisoner's bed.

"Is there anything more I can do now—any orders for the morning, sir?"

"I should like Gibbings sent for. You know my man—he was in Rangers with us."

"Gibbings of letter F Company? Of course I know him. I will send a messenger at unlocking by the early train. And breakfast? The rules say 6.30."

"After to-morrow I'll abide by the rules. But don't wake me up in the morning, please, till I ring." The Colonel pointed with a smile to the bell handle with which the cell was duly provided, according to Act of Parliament.

Colonel St. Evelyn, in spite of the awful charge which hung over him slept soundly that night; slept late, moreover, through the din



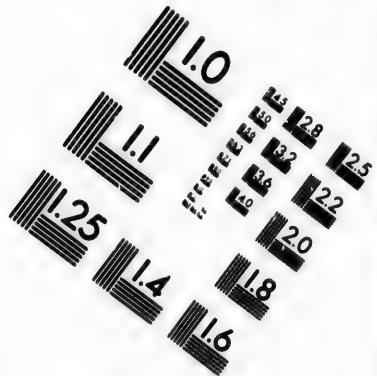
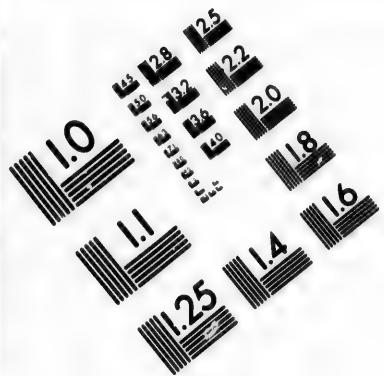
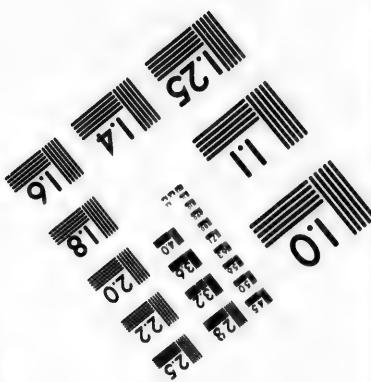
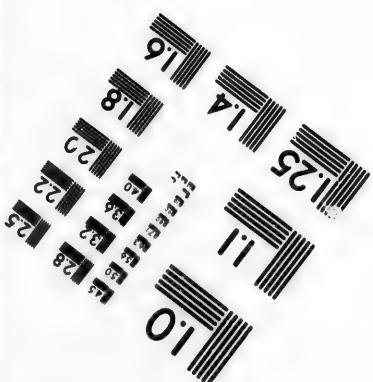
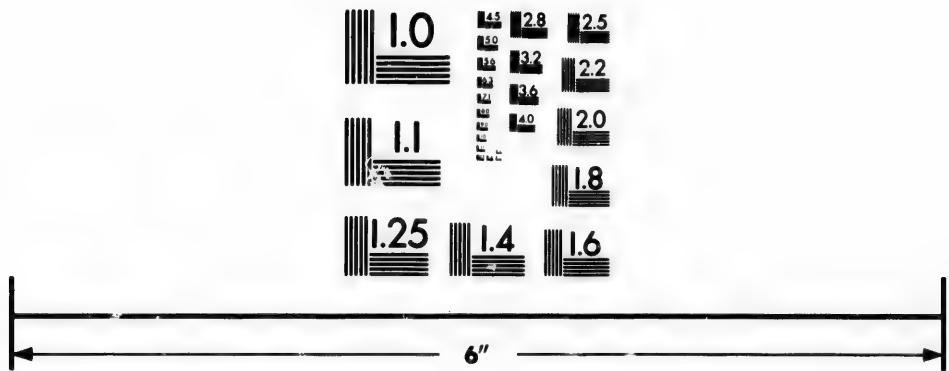


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of the awakening jail ; through the cell visitation, the unlocking of the doors, the morning muster, the serving of food ; he was dimly conscious of a sound of scrubbing and washing, and, as he lay in his narrow bunk between sleeping and waking, fancied himself once more in the cabin of a troop-ship whilst they holystoned the deck overhead.

The bright sunlight streaming through the small barred window presently aroused him to the reality of his position. He sprang from the bed and turned the bell-handle.

In reply, the governor and Gibbings appeared together.

"How did you sleep, sir ?" asked the governor. "It's long past nine."

"Like a top. I should be glad of some food soon, Ruddock."

"I'll see to it, sir, while Gibbings helps you to dress," and Major Ruddock withdrew.

"Well, Gibbings," continued the Colonel ; "you didn't expect to see me here ?"

"I was afraid they meant mischief, sir ; but I never thought it would go so far as this."

"Why, what do you mean, man ? Did anything lead you to suppose I was suspected ? If so, you should have let me know."

"I only found out their dirty tricks a day or two back. There's been a fellow spying and prying at the Hall these weeks past."

"Ah, a detective, I suppose set on by Lady Lezaire."

"I can't be sure sir, but I'm afraid that's it. My lady has got a kink in her brain, and lays the blame for everything on you."

"She abhors, detests me, I know ; but I think she has gone a little too far this time. Only I must be ready to meet her. What's the line of attack ; have you any idea ? On what will they base the charge ? What was the detective doing all the time he was at the Hall ?"

Gibbings recounted Earswick's movements and manœuvres as far as he was able, upbraiding himself at the same time and without hesitation for his simplicity and want of reserve.

"I don't blame you, Gibbings," said the Colonel. "How were you to guess what he was after ? At any rate, it don't matter now. What we have to think of is my defence."

"You will have a lawyer, of course."

"The best that can be got for money. You shall telegraph for me to Amos Davis of High Holborn, begging him to come down for the first examination."

"When will that be, sir ?"

"To-day. They are bound to have me up at once. I shall apply for a remand, and Davis can be here to-morrow. We'll turn the tables on them yet, never fear."

"It must have been a great shock to you, sir," said Gibbings, sympathetically. "And the mistress—Mrs. St. Evelyn, I mean—how did she take it ?"

"She does not know yet. I could not break it to her over there, and now it seems more difficult than ever. How is it to be done ?"

"I hope I don't intrude, sir—but wouldn't my lady—" suggested Gibbings, timidly.

"Her mother would be the proper person, of course. But how can I trust Lady Lezaire? She would probably delight in torturing my poor dear Rachel just because she is my wife."

"Oh, sir, hardly," Gibbings protested.

"I'd far rather you told her. I have every confidence in your fidelity, your good feeling, Gibbings."

"I'll do my best, sir," said the trusty servitor, with rather a husky voice. "I'm only a rough chap, sir; but you've been a good master to me, and I'd go any lengths to serve you. When shall I speak to the mistress, sir?"

"Directly she returns."

"When do you expect her, sir?"

"In the course of to-day or to-morrow. She promised to wire directly she started. You must be on the look-out for any telegrams; they will be addressed, of course, to the Hall."

"Yes, sir. Will the mistress go straight there, sir?" asked Gibbings.

"Naturally. Where else?"

"Then my lady will be bound to tell her first. Hadn't I better meet the mistress at the station, sir? I could invent some story, perhaps; say you've been taken ill and couldn't get to the Hall; that you had to go to an hospital; and then we could bring her here. She would not know the difference at first, and you could tell her the truth, or part of it."

"I believe you're right, Gibbings; but I'm quite unable to advise. I don't mind about myself, but I'm quite knocked over when I think of her."

The governor now looked in to hint that time was running on.

"You are to be brought before the Bench at eleven, Colonel. It is only formal, but we must not be late."

"I shall apply for a remand, as I am still undefended. They must grant that. Who will be sitting?"

"A very full meeting, I expect. Lord Prudhames said he would certainly be present, and Mr. Etherly and General Wyndham-Parker——"

"Who'd like to see me hanged. But I shall cheat him of that satisfaction, I think. At any rate, they shall not say I showed the white feather."

The Sessions Court was of course crowded; all Thorpeshire was convulsed. Such a *cause celebre* had not been known in the county for a century or more:

"How does he look?" "How does he take it?" "Did he do it?" "What will he say?" These were the eager queries bandied from lip to lip as high and low, peer and peasant, magnate and working man, jostled and fought for a chance of seeing and hearing what passed.

No answer to these vexed questions, no solution of the awful pro-

blem, were offered by St. Evelyn's demeanor in court. He faced his judges—the whole bench of magistrates, of whose body he was still a member—boldly, with head erect, defiant, and unabashed. "It will save your lordship's and the court's time," he said, in reply to the first formal interrogatories, "if I ask at once for a remand. I am still undefended. I claim time to secure legal assistance."

He spoke firmly, in a loud, high-pitched voice, as though he was giving the word of command.

"We cannot object to that," said Lord Prudhames, the chairman. "What time do you ask?"

"A day or two, my lord."

"Remand till Saturday. Enter that on the sheet, Mr. Lashleigh. And you will understand"—this to the prisoner—"that we are forbidden by law to allow bail."

St. Evelyn bowed in courteous acknowledgment.

"I am aware of that. I have not asked for bail."

With that he was removed, and passed by a private door direct from the court-house back to the jail.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS. ST. EVELYN HEARS.

THE distinguished prisoner was exercising, alone, in the trial prisoners' yard that afternoon, when Gibbings, who had gone back to Straddletorpe, entered the enclosure carrying a telegram in his hand.

"This has been opened," said the Colonel at once.

"By my lady, sir. She insisted, saying she was sure it was from Mrs. St. Evelyn."

"I wonder she dared. What right had she to break the seal?" he cried, as he strode impatiently up and down the narrow yard. "And now I am powerless to protect poor Rachel from her."

"Is the mistress coming to-day?" Gibbons at last ventured to ask.

"Early this evening. All well; starting by mid-day boat; expect us at nine," she says."

"That explains, sir. My lady ordered the carriage—the large landau, sir, and the luggage-cart—to be at Market Reepham at nine."

"Is Lady Lezaire going to the station herself?"

"I'm not sure as to that, sir. I could find out, perhaps, if there was time."

"In any case you must forestall her. Be on the platform, Gibbings, and get first speech of Mrs. St. Evelyn. Tell her what we arranged together."

When the London express ran into Market Reepham station that evening, Lady Lezaire was prominent among the waiting crowd.

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It was her first appearance in public. She was in deep mourning for her son and a murmur of sympathy went through the throng as she stepped forward towards the halted train.

Then Mrs. St. Evelyn's pretty head appeared at the window, and it was known why the mother had come there.

Many people pressed forward, curious to hear what greetings passed between the two ladies, and in the crowd Gibbings was shut out entirely.

"Dear mother!" cried Mrs. St. Evelyn, directly. "But where is Ferdinand?" Her voice changed at once to one of manifest anxiety.

"He could not get here in time. He was detained," faltered Lady Lezaire, deterred by a look in her daughter's face from speaking more plainly.

"He is ill, I am sure of it. Something terrible has happened. Let me go to him at once," cried Mrs. St. Evelyn.

"No, no; your husband is well enough," said Lady Lezaire; "only he was prevented from coming."

"But why? You are not telling me the whole truth. I must go to him. Is the carriage here?"

"Of course, dear," said Lady Lezaire; "the landau—there is room for you all. Come, they will see to the baggage. We will go on at once to the Hall."

The Lezaire party—her ladyship and daughter, the nurses and the two children—left the platform, making their way with some difficulty through the crowd.

Mrs. St. Evelyn, as she passed, caught sight of Gibbings; something in the man's face—his gravity, the fixed way in which he looked at her—prompted her to speak.

"Why, here is Gibbings. Where is your master?" she asked eagerly, and it was clear she had been quite dissatisfied with Lady Lezaire's explanation.

"The Colonel's not very well," Gibbings said, a little hesitatingly, as though the fiction did not come very glibly to his tongue.

"I thought so," cried Mrs. St. Evelyn, snatching at the words. "I knew you were concealing something, mother. What is it? Quick! I must know the worst."

"He would like to see you as soon as possible," went on Gibbings.

"Of course. She is going to him now," put in Lady Lezaire. "We are only losing time. The carriage is waiting to take us to the Hall."

"To the Hall?" and again Gibbings's voice and manner conveyed a hidden mystery to the anxious wife.

"To the Hall," repeated Mrs. St. Evelyn. "Surely he is there if he is ill?" She now looked at her mother with bewildered inquiring eyes.

Before Lady Lezaire could bring herself to frame the falsehood she would have liked to utter, Gibbings had replied—

"The master is in Market Reepham; in—in—in the hospital."

"Why wasn't I told this at once? Oh, mother, you have been

deceiving me. It was unfair, unkind. Take me to your master at once, Gibbings."

"I acted for the best, I assure you, Rachel," pleaded Lady Lezaire. "It was so terrible to have to tell you. Won't you wait? Let me go with you."

"No, no; I shall go quicker with Gibbings. Get a fly."

"At least take the carriage," urged Lady Lezaire. "We can wait."

But already Mrs. St. Evelyn had disappeared, and was to be seen entering a cab, which Gibbings had wisely ordered to be in attendance outside the station.

It was a short ten minutes' drive from the station to the jail in Market Reepham. The summer twilight had faded out of the sky, but there was sufficient light by which to recognize the forbidding exterior of the grim old jail.

"What is this?" cried Mrs. St. Evelyn, as the carriage stopped. "Not a hospital! It is the prison—the county jail. Why do you bring me here?" she continued, with quickly risen agitation to Gibbings, who had dismounted the box and opened the door of the fly.

"This is where Colonel St. Evelyn is," replied the man sorrowfully.

"In jail? A prisoner? My dear husband? Impossible!"

Gibbings did not dare reply, nor did Major Ruddock, who now appeared at the lodge gate, to whom Mrs. St. Evelyn repeated her horror-stricken inquiry.

"At least he will tell me himself. Take me to Colonel St. Evelyn this instant!" she cried, half frantic with indignation and terror.

"The visiting hours are past," humbly protested the governor, "but—"

"I must and will see him. The rules cannot apply to him. You shall not keep me from him."

The stern disciplinarian gave way, but with manifest reluctance, to the pathetic entreaties of his old friend's wife.

Poor Mrs. St. Evelyn was led through the same dreary passages that her husband had traversed the night before, realizing with a deeper anguish the horrors of this gruesome place. She was almost fainting when the last bolts were withdrawn, the last iron-bound door unlocked, and she saw by the dim gaslight her husband standing ready to receive her in his outstretched arms.

"Oh, Ferdinand!" was all the tender-hearted wife could say, and for quite five minutes neither could utter any coherent words. She lay there in his arms, sobbing her heart out, while he vainly strove to soothe and quiet her with endearing epithets, and tried to kiss away her tears.

"What does it mean, Ferdinand? I am utterly amazed, bewildered. Why are you here? Tell me quick. I think I shall understand."

"I have been arrested on a monstrous charge. I am accused, falsely accused—you believe me, Rachel?"

"As if I could doubt my husband. Whatever they say, whatever happens, I could never bring myself to think evil of you, Ferdinand."

"I had enemies, I knew that—bitter, unscrupulous foes—but I never thought they would bring me to this. It is a most wild, wicked invention. I am absolutely innocent, God knows—"

"But of what, Ferdinand? You have not told me yet of what you are accused."

"There are those who, it seems, will go any lengths to brand me, to ruin me utterly, in this world and in that to come. They do not hesitate to charge me with a foul, dastardly crime—"

"A crime? You, my dearest, best-beloved husband? What crime?"

"I am taxed, Rachel—prepare yourself, dear girl; be brave, be strong, for you will find what I have to say most grievous, most terribly hard to bear. They say it was I who killed him; I, your husband, his brother, in affection if not by ties of blood."

"Killed him? Carysfort? You?"

"They say I murdered him."

"Oh! shameful, base, dastardly lie!"

"You do not, will not believe it? That is all I care to know."

"Believe that, Ferdinand, of you?" She raised her tearful face from his shoulder and looked with earnest trustful eyes into his, now bent so anxiously on her. "Never!"

"I am satisfied then; they may try their worst. Whatever happens, I shall be strengthened and fortified by your simple, unquestioning faith."

"Whatever happens indeed, Ferdinand: if all the world should swear it, I would not believe that you could have done such a wicked, horrible thing."

"My sweet wife, your brave words give me courage. I am ready now to face the worst. We will fight them and conquer, never fear." He bent his head and kissed her solemnly on the forehead, after which there was a long silence; their hearts were too full for words.

"It's growing late," said the Colonel at length—"you cannot, must not linger here."

"Oh, Ferdinand, do not send me away from you! This is my place, here, at your side."

"My sweet, it is quite impossible. The rules are inexorable; besides, you want rest. Remember, if you are to help me now, you must keep up your courage and your strength."

"Do not drive me from you, Ferdinand, I implore."

"I am helpless, dearest. We must bend before the law."

"I will not go far then, Ferdinand. I must, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing I am close at hand."

"You will be near enough at the Hall, dearest."

"I could not go there: don't ask me. I could not bear to face my mother."

" You have seen her ? Lady Lezaire has not been unkind, I hope ? Surely her cruel animosity does not extend to you ? "

" She is my mother, Ferdinand, and I daresay she means well. But do not ask me to see her or speak to her just now ; I could not bear it. Besides, I could not be separated by all those miles from you. I must be with you always—every moment, at least, that is possible—while you are passing through this awful trial."

" Where will you go ? You will be better really at the Hall."

" I will take rooms here in Market Reepham, at one of the hotels—the 'Raven,' anywhere. Do not oppose me in this."

" My sweet pet, I know the spirit that animates you—far better than from me to balk you ; indeed it encourages me, and gives me fresh strength."

The adieux between husband and wife were painful and protracted, but at last they were said. Then, as the cab still waited at the prison gates, Mrs. St. Evelyn, still escorted by Gibbins, was driven to the " Raven " hotel. After this the faithful man-servant then drove on to the Hall, whence he despatched the lady's-maid with portmanteaus and so forth, to join her young mistress that same night at the hotel.

CHAPTER XXV.

BEFORE THE BENCH.

THE re-examination of the prisoner, Ferdinand Levallois St. Evelyn, as he was charged, was somewhat prolonged. It occupied the whole of one day, not only because the facts were slowly elicited, but because Mr. Amos Davis, the prisoner's attorney, fought and contested every point, inch by inch. Mr. Davis had followed in his father's footsteps as the head of one of the most lucrative of Old Bailey practices, but his talents were those of the advocate, especially as regards cross-examination, and he would assuredly have risen to great eminence at the Bar.

The prosecution had been taken up by the Treasury, which was represented as usual by Sergeant Frankfort. They had often met thus in the preliminaries of a great *cause celebre*, and it was Amos Davis's boast that he had always held his own against the great Queen's Counsel. They met once more in the little sessional court of Market Reepham : a pair of opponents in strong contrast ; the sharp, ferret-faced solicitor with his black, restless eyes, and the ponderous, slow-moving, deliberate-speaking barrister, in whose solid astuteness lay his chief strength.

Sergeant Frankfort did not wish, before the magistrates, to prove too much ; enough to secure committal, that was all he attempted. Mr. Davis, on the other hand, wished the prosecution to show its whole game : the line of attack, the good cards on which it counted, and the way they were to be played.

The first witnesses were called to prove the cause of the young baronet's death, the course his illness ran, the attitude of his relations and others at the Hall.

St. Evelyn's disapproval of Lady Lezaire's resolve to call in medical aid was elicited, although Mr. Davis objected only to be overruled. He objected also, but vainly, to evidence showing St. Evelyn's animus against his poor little brother-in-law; and he defiantly, indeed impudently, bearded the whole Bench when it proposed to listen to Mr. Tinson in support of the theory that the Colonel had a deep interest in the young baronet's death.

All this was mere surmise, Mr. Davis contended scornfully; vague, unjust innuendo, unsupported conjecture.

He was less jaunty when Mr. Earswick, the detective was put into the box. The story now told brought suspicion more closely home to the Colonel. Every one in the court—Bench, Bar and audience; poor little Mrs. St. Evelyn, with her scared, sorrowful face; even the prisoner, although outwardly stern and impassive—listened with breathless interest to the police officer.

The reader knows already what he had to tell: the discovery of the poison-label in various pieces—one in the very chamber of the crime, another in St. Evelyn's private study; the clue thereby obtained; its pursuit straight into the chemist's shop at Cleobury.

"The rope's around his neck now," whispered General Wyndham-Parker, with sardonic satisfaction, to a neighbor on the Bench, Mr. Etherly.

Then the poison-book was produced, and the Colonel's signature to the damning entry was sworn to by Mr. Tinson.

"It's tightening," said the spiteful little General.

Mr. Gravely was called, a timid, weak-kneed witness, but he was positive as to the purchase of the arsenic by Colonel St. Evelyn.

"By the prisoner?" asked Mr. Davis, with a fierce incredulity that shook Mr. Gravely instantly.

"Ye—ye—s; by Colonel St. Evelyn. By the prisoner, I mean. To the best of my belief, at least."

"Your belief!" Mr. Davis looked up at the Bench, and then around the court, saying, quite plainly, but without words, "What can this poor creature's belief be worth?"

"How did you know him? Did you see his face?"

"Yes—or part of his face. He wore a large muffler."

"Did you hear his voice?"

"Ye—ye—s. I heard his voice. He asked me for the arsenic."

"How often had you heard him speak before?"

The witness was not sure.

"Half-a-dozen times?"

No answer.

"Four times—three times—twice—once? Did you ever hear his voice in your life? Come, be careful. You are on your oath; your words have a terrible, an awful importance—a man's life depends upon them. Now tell me, on your oath, have you ever heard the prisoner, Colonel St. Evelyn's, voice before?"

"Yes, once; once. I am quite certain of that."

"And where, pray?"

"Here, in this very court. He was on the bench, and he spoke to me——"

"Was he giving judgment?"

"Yes."

"Against whom? Go on. I insist, the Bench insists, on knowing."

"Against me,"—in a very low voice. "I was summoned for an infraction of the Patent Medicines Act."

"You were found guilty, eh? And sentenced—to imprisonment?"

"Oh dear, no; only to a fine."

"And this is your only ground for recognizing the Colonel's voice, or indeed himself. That will do, Mr. Gravely," said Mr. Davis, in a voice of deep dejection, as though overwhelmed at the turpitude of this weak fellow-creature.

"Not so tight as you imagined, eh, Parker?" chuckled Mr. Etherly.

"One moment," interposed Sergeant Frankfort. "You had other reasons, Mr. Gravely, I think, for recognizing—for being sure it was Colonel St. Evelyn?"

"I knew him by his coat."

Mr. Davis and his client interchanged glances. The testimony of the coat, a great point in the case, was to have been reserved at this preliminary examination.

"What kind of coat?"

"An Inverness, they call it, I think. Of striped plaid, yellow and red; rather staring pattern."

"You had seen the Colonel wear it?"

"Frequently, when he drove through Clebury."

"I shall call other witnesses to speak to that coat, and the Colonel's fondness for it," said Sergeant Frankfort, but the remark was hardly necessary. Dozens of people on the bench and in the body of the court knew the Colonel's favorite Inverness.

"It ought to be produced," said Lord Prudhames. "The witness should be asked if he recognizes it."

"I am afraid, my lord, that is not possible. I hereby give notice to the other side to produce that coat," he said, looking hard at the prisoner. "But it will not be put in. We must not, do not expect it. The coat will not be produced, for the simple reason that it has disappeared. Its disappearance is a part, and a strong part, of our case, my lord."

Mr. Davis exchanged glances with the prisoner, and rose to his feet.

"I object most distinctly to the line Sergeant Frankfort is pursuing. It is irregular—very irregular. The question of the coat is not before the Court."

"We can easily bring it before the Court. Recall Alfred Earswick."

The detective stepped back into the box, and was made to tell the story of his search for the Inverness in the Colonel's dressing-room.

"You could not find the greatcoat. No. No one will find that coat, I am pretty well convinced of that. But I give notice to produce it--and--and"--the Sergeant looked leisurely at his notes, turning them over page by page--"and--the Colonel's private diary."

It was a home thrust, suddenly and unexpectedly delivered.

"What diary?" asked Mr. Davis blankly. "I am at a loss to understand—"

"You cannot deny the diary, Mr. Davis. Its existence will be sworn to."

Earswick was recalled, and described his second visit to the Colonel's study the morning after he had overhauled the wardrobe up-stairs.

"What was your object?" asked the Sergeant.

"I was looking for some clue to the Colonel's daily movements."

"And did you come upon any?"

"Well, yes; what I wanted was there—I am sure of that. But I was not able to investigate it thoroughly. Gibbings came in and found me with a book in my hand. We had words, and I had to give the book up."

"What was the book? Do you remember?"

"Perfectly; the Colonel's diary. I opened it and read several entries bearing, I think, upon the case—about his journeys and what he did. I caught the word Cleobury, I think—"

"Aha! That will do for the present."

The Sergeant looked at the Bench. "You know now, my lord, why the production of the diary is important."

"It shall be produced," said Mr. Amos Davis quietly, but with a tinge of uneasiness. He had been whispering to his client during the last few minutes, and the answer had been evidently prompted by the Colonel. The lawyer was not satisfied that it was wise to yield the point. He had experience of diaries read in open court, and knew how embarrassing the entries often proved.

The case for the prosecution was now closed, and Sergeant Frankfort in a forcible speech told the Bench it was their bounden duty to commit the prisoner for trial at the coming assizes.

"One word, my lord," said Mr. Amos Davis, rising, and holding a small volume in his hand, the leaves of which he had been turning over and reading with close attention. "The learned Sergeant has expressed a wish that my client's private diary should be put in."

"Yes, if it can be found," said Sergeant Frankfort, with a sneer.

"My client has every desire to further the ends of justice, and as regards the diary, is fortunately able to comply with the request of the other side. It is here. We sent for it directly the question was raised,"

" May I see it ?" asked the Sergeant, putting out his hand.

" It is for the information and satisfaction of the Court, to whom I now surrender it," said Mr. Davis, quite ignoring his opponent. " I give it up to you, my lord, but I beg that it may be at once sealed with the seal of the Court, and safely kept till required."

" Do you produce the Inverness also ?" asked the Sergeant, determined to have the last word. But Mr. Davis did not choose to reply.

" You have nothing more to say ?" asked Lord Prudhames. " No ?" And then he whispered a word to the magistrate on each side of his chair ; the message passed both ways along the Bench, and was answered by affirmative nods.

" Colonel St. Evelyn,"—the chairman now addressed the prisoner—it does not beseem me, nor does your present deeply painful position call for any remarks from the Bench. I have only to inform you, in the briefest and most formal manner, that we think a sufficient case has been made out to warrant your full committal for trial. Let the prisoner be removed."

The governor of the jail stepped forward, with a look of infinite distress upon his hard, weather-beaten old face, offered his patron an arm.

" No, thank you. Go first ; I will follow. You need not fear. I shall not try run away." And the Colonel, with a nod to the Bench, and a half smile, walked out, upright and unconcerned.

There was a slight attempt at a cheer among the throng in the body of the court and outside. The Colonel was not unpopular with the people ; he was a sportsman, and had kept money moving about Straddlethorpe.

Besides, Gibbings was there, and the mob followed his lead when he characterized the whole prosecution as a dirty plot that was bound to recoil on those—" I won't mention names, but a nod's as good as a wink,—it'll all come back, I say, on those who planned it."

On the bench, opinions were decidedly hostile to St. Evelyn. Only old Etherly and one or two more still doubted.

" That man is not guilty. I have watched every move on his face," said old Etherly.

" Bah ! He has nerves of iron," replied the General, spitefully. " Besides, looks don't prove innocence."

" He'll slip through your fingers yet, General," said the first speaker.

" Don't you believe he did it ?" retorted the General, turning sharply on his brother magistrate.

" I do not believe he did. What is more, I do not believe that any Market Reepham jury will convict him on such evidence as we have had to-day."

" Then there will be a grave miscarriage of justice, and it will be a disgrace to the whole country."

" It would be so if we harged an innocent man."

" Stuff and nonsense ! But come, let me ask you one question ; if he didn't murder the lad, who did ?"

"If that's your only line of argument your case must be weak indeed," said Mr. Etherly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MARKET REEPHAM ASSIZES.

THE summer Assizes were held Market Reepham some weeks later. Her Majesty's judges were received with something of old-fashioned pomp and circumstance in this respectable city. The High Sheriff, in a brand new uniform, met them in a state carriage with lackeys in blue and silver, and the procession from the station to the judges' lodging was escorted by tipstaves and javelin-men in quaint ancient costumes.

The judge who presided in the criminal court had never come to the Thorpeshire Circuit before, and he told the grand jury at the opening of the Assize that their attendance in such numbers to discharge their public duties was an honor to the county, and might be held up as an example to the local magistracy everywhere. He hoped as many as found it convenient would dine with him at his lodgings that night.

But the Thorpeshire magnates had not come to be asked to dinner; nor was it purely public spirit that crowded the grand-jury box that Assize. They had come to hear the great *cause celebre*, to take their part in the proceedings, and when they had found a true bill, as was inevitable, to see how St. Evelyn behaved.

The court was densely packed with people; all the galleries, every inch of standing room in the body of the court. In the former were several ladies, great ones too: a duchess and leader of fashion had come down from London on purpose, seeking a new sensation in watching narrowly the demeanour of a man she knew when being tried for his life.

Compared to hers, the motives—bitter hatred and consuming thirst for vengeance—that brought Lady Lezaire were legitimate, or at least excusable.

Colonel St. Evelyn bore his position with the same easy self-possessed air he had shown at his first examination. He looked slowly round the court when first brought into the dock, noting who was present, with now a half-smile, now a whole sneer, as his eye rested on each in turn. With Lady Lezaire he exchanged fierce glances; he gave the duchess a pleasant off-hand nod which quite disconcerted her.

The trial followed its usual course. St. Evelyn, on arraignment, pleaded "Not guilty" in a firm voice, which had its effects on all present.

But Sergeant Frankfort's opening, setting forth the whole of the facts—circumstantial in the main, but supported by certain tangible

evidence—soon removed any impression favorable to the prisoner. The case looked more and more black against him as it proceeded. Witness after witness was called to give the testimony already reported in the previous chapter.

The prisoner's counsel was a Mr. Harry Blackstone, a very jolly young barrister, with a rising reputation on circuit; a round-faced, rosy-cheeked, smiling, good-tempered man, who was soon on excellent terms with the jury. His habit was to treat matters lightly, as though the charge was all a mistake, the indictment a mere joke, and this system served him well in the present case.

His line in cross-examination was ridicule. He made great fun of Earswick the detective, and his disguises.

"You called yourself a lawyer's clerk, eh? And dressed the part? Have you ever been on the stage?"

"No."

"Were you brought up to anything—before you took to the police?"

"Medicine."

"Oho! The blue paper and the poison-label was all in your line, then. At a chemist's? Or, I beg your pardon, at the Veterinary College?"

"No; at St. Bartholomew's."

"But you never took your diploma?"

"Pardon me, I did."

"And you'd rather be a detective than a doctor? Curious preference that. Think you have a special talent for investigation, perhaps?"

"I like the solution of problems. I confess."

"Hence the very ingenious theory you have started in this case. Pleasant practice, constructing theories which may cost a fellow-creature his life. That will do, Mr. Earswick."

And for the first time the police officer felt crestfallen and dissatisfied with the part he had played.

The great card of the prosecution, however, was Mr. Gravely the chemist. The purchase of the poison was its strong point, and everything depended upon the identification of the accused.

Mr. Tinson spoke first as to the signature in the poison-book. It was compared with other authenticated signatures, and then an expert was called in corroboration.

"The handwriting is the same—to the best of my belief," said the expert, with some qualification.

"Cannot you speak quite positively?"

"No. It is probably the same, more than probable—but not, in my opinion, certainly—the same."

"Thank you," said Mr. Blackstone, with a grateful laugh. "That will do. I shall not cross-examine you."

With Mr. Gravely he was very different.

"Are you fond of music?" he asked, quite abruptly.

"M' lud, I really must protest—" began Sergeant Frankfort.

"I crave your your patience, m' lud," retorted Mr. Blackstone, and again he turned to the witness.

"What instrument do you play? The piano, hautboy, jew's-harp? or do you only whistle? Come!"

"I don't understand, sir," faltered Mr. Gravely.

"Answer me. Are you a good musician? Have you a good ear for music?"

"I don't know any music."

"You have no ear?"

"No ear for music, sir. I am not very quick of hearing, indeed."

"Have you a good memory?"

"Yes, I think so."

"For faces?"

"Well, I'm not so sure, sir."

"How often have you seen Colonel St. Evelyn? Once?"

"Twice, sir."

"The first time?"

"On the bench; the second, in my shop."

"You remember him, then; you can swear to that? After dark—a man you had only seen once before."

"I thought I recognized him. I knew his coat."

"You are not perfectly sure?"

"As sure as I could be of anything. He said he was Colonel St. Evelyn, too."

"He might have *said* he was the Duke of Wellington, or the Pope of Rome. What I want to know is, whom do you say he was?"

"I thought it was Colonel St. Evelyn, sir. I did indeed."

And that was all Mr. Blackstone could extract from the witness. Yet the impression left was certainly one of doubt. Mr. Gravely was hardly positive as to the identity of the purchaser of the poison.

"Well, now, let me try this famous memory of yours another way. The occasion on which you sold this arsenic is, I hope, fresh in your memory?"

"Perfectly."

"And exactly the time of sale? Do you remember that?"

"Pretty exactly. It was towards evening."

"After dark?"

"No, only dusk; about seven o'clock."

"Not later; are you sure?"

"It would be about seven. I had had my tea."

"You must be very particular about this. The exact time, I must have, to a moment, if possible."

"It was seven, sir, I am quite sure."

"Well, I will take your word for it, and I hope his lordship and the gentlemen of the jury will do the same. Your accuracy in this respect may be of very considerable importance, Mr. Gravely. That will do for the present."

The remainder of the prosecution dealt with the other evidence—the negative evidence, so to speak, of damaging conjecture rather than fact.

The samples of horse medicine prescribed by the Colonel were

produced; and the chemical analysis, which distinctly contradicted any pretence that arsenic was an ingredient. If St. Evelyn used the drug in his medicaments, it was not for his own horses.

Again testimony was adduced to emphasize the absence of the Inverness. What had become of it? Let the defence produce it, or say where it had gone. Failing this, only one inference was possible—namely, that it had been intentionally made away with.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DEFENCE.

THE defence set up by Mr. Blackstone followed his usual method. He was off-handed, almost flippant in tone, laughing the whole thing to scorn.

"The prosecution is weak, miserably weak," he cried, "and must break down, for this, if for no other reason. There has not been the slightest attempt to show that the prisoner actually administered poison to the deceased—if poison was administered at all; and here again the evidence has absolutely failed. You cannot, gentlemen of the jury, you must not ignore such glaring flaws as these.

"But I wish you to realize all the glaring weaknesses and inconsistencies of the evidence. It is in the main artificial evidence, if I may use the word—manufactured on purpose—of course I do not say maliciously—but on purpose to back up and bear out the attack made. An aspiring, I may say a clever, detective has arrived at a certain conclusion, based on a possibility, perhaps, but a most misleading one, and all that has been adduced has been worked in to fit.

"We have been told that the prisoner and his young brother-in-law were bad friends—a reason for murdering him. That through his wife he would inherit all the Straddlethorpe property—a stronger reason for murdering him. That when the blow, the cruel dastardly blow, had been struck, the prisoner threw every difficulty in the way of attempting recovery—a last convincing proof of homicidal intent.

"Thus the criminal was found ready to hand. Evidence of his guilt—a small matter, of course—alone was wanting.

"It was most ingeniously obtained by Mr. Earswick, the detective; I compliment him most sincerely on his constructive skill.

"But what is it all worth? You will, I think, agree with me that everything turns upon that visit to the Cleobury chemist on the evening of the 29th of April; that is the most material, nay, the most vital point of the case.

"Now what are the facts as they have been adduced? A gentle-

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A gentle.

man, pass me the word, a magistrate of the county, a person of position, well known, and till now generally respected, wishes to purchase some arsenic—for an evil purpose, says the prosecution. How does he go about it? Secretly? To a remote spot—to London, or the other end of the country?

"Not at all. He puts on a favorite overcoat, one of a bold, indeed obtrusive pattern, which is universally known by sight; and thus advertised, he walks into a chemist's shop not a dozen miles from Stradklethorpe Hall.

"He wants arsenic—not strychnine, or morphia, or any of the more insidious lethal drugs that kill without much show; but arsenic, the 'bungler's poison,' the weapon of the common ignoramus who does not know that its traces are tell-tale and not to be escaped.

"He buys it over the counter, in his own name; he signs that name without hesitation in the book kept for the purpose, and before a second witness.

"Such is the story put forward; such are the facts alleged. Let us look into the facts; let us examine the story.

"The main question is obviously one of identification; first of the individual, and next of his handwriting. I will dispose of the latter at once, because it is the simplest.

"Mr. Tinson has told you that it is the prisoner's signature; you have had other authentic signatures to compare with it. But I must impress upon you that neither Mr. Tinson nor yourselves are competent to decide this point. It is a technical point, dependent really upon a professional opinion—the opinion of one who has made handwritings a study. That opinion you have had; an expert has been in the box, and he has told you he is not certain the signature in the book is Colonel St. Evelyn's. He himself is not satisfied of it; and I warn you that where he, a professional expert, is in doubt, you would be very wrong to make up your minds.

"But that is a minor matter, as I have said. The question of personal identification is the real issue.

"Now this, gentlemen, depends on a single witness. You have heard him in the box. A poor creature, weak-kneed and simple-minded, this Mr. Gravely; not necessarily devoid of credence, but by no means clear and positive in the testimony he offers.

"He tells you he knew the prisoner, recognized him as Colonel St. Evelyn. How? Why?

"By his voice. But he had only heard that voice once before, and under rather unpleasant conditions. He admitted, too, under cross-examination, that he had no ear for music no quick apprehension of sound; that, indeed, he was rather hard of hearing.

"By his face? A sufficiently remarkable face, perhaps—you can judge for yourselves. But the witness also admitted that he only saw a part of it, that the rest was covered up by a large muffler.

"This is the only testimony of identification. The other witness to the sale, Mr. Graveley's son, is not called, and I can only conclude

it is because he cannot speak to Colonel St. Evelyn, although, if this be the case, he has been guilty of a misdemeanor.

"Are you going to convict a man of murder, to take away his life, to burden your own consciences with the guilt of judicial murder on no more satisfactory grounds than these?"

"Gentlemen, I will spare you that everlasting, ineradicable reproach. I will dispose of all these doubts. I will explain the chemist's hesitation, the expert's denial of the signature, the disappearance of the Inverness. I will satisfy you, I venture to assert, on all these points. My case is simply this. I can prove to you, I hope, beyond dispute, that the prisoner, Colonel St. Evelyn, never went to Cleobury at all."

It was a *coup de theatre* which produced a sensation in the court.

"Call William Gibbings," went on Mr. Blackstone.

The Colonel's servant, dressed in a new suit of iron-grey dittoes, with a gold horse-shoe pin in his white scarf, stepped smartly into the box, and stood at attention before the judge.

After the usual preliminary questions, the witness was asked—

"Do you remember the 29th of April last?"

"I think so, sir."

"Is there anything particular that would fix that day and its occurrences in your memory?"

"Yes, sir. We bought the roan cob, 'Strawberry Leaf,' that day."

"Who bought it? You?"

"I and the Colonel together, sir; at Clungunford Farm."

"You accompanied your master to Clungunford? Yes? Did you go over from Straddlethorpe?"

"Yes, sir, in the afternoon, after lunch. Reached it about four."

"And left it?"

"At five or half-past."

"Returning to Straddlethorpe?"

"Not direct, sir. We took the moorland round by Clutton Fells to try the new cob. He was in the shafts."

"What is the distance from Clungunford, by Clutton, to Straddlethorpe?"

"A matter of eighteen miles."

"What time was it when you reached the Hall?"

"Close on eight?"

"And now, tell me, how does Cleobury lie with reference to Clungunford and Straddlethorpe?"

"It's on the far side of the Hall."

"To get to Cleobury from Clungunford, you'd have to pass through Straddlethorpe?"

"It's the straightest road. There's another way, up by North Bitchburn, but it's a long way round."

"How many miles?"

"Six or seven and twenty."

"Leaving Clungunford, at 5, or 5.30, you could not reach Cleobury at 7?"

"Not by neither road. Nor yet by 8."

Several jurymen nodded their heads at this. They were all Thorpeshire men, and knew its roads and distances by heart.

"One word more. There is a line and railway communication between Straddlethorpe and Cleobury. Could a person leave Clungunford at five, drive to Straddlethorpe, and reach Cleabury about seven by catching any train?"

"The last train in the evening between Straddlethorpe and Cleobury is a few minutes before six."

The importance of this unexpected evidence for the defence was not to be overrated. But there was much more in corroboration.

First of all, the Colonel's diary was called for and put up. Its entries, at the counsel's request, were read for several days previous to the 29th April. On that day the entry ran as follows:—

"Heard from Gamaliel about the last acceptance. He's quite unconscionable. Peters complains of the last lot of oats—because he did not buy them.

"Went with Gibbings to Clungunford. Tried Farmer Holt's roan cob; bought him for forty guineas. Not dear; well ribbed up, 15 hands, and rising six. Drove him home by Clutton Fells, eighteen miles, in a little over two hours."

Farmer Holt was called next and proved the sale, about the 29th April. He was a little shaky as to the exact date, but he was certain that the Colonel and his man drove off with the new purchase by the road to Clutton Fells.

"That gentleman, is the prisoner's defence," said Mr. Blackstone, in a joyous, laughing manner which soon became more serious. "I have proved an *alibi*, one of the clearest and most incontrovertible *alibis* that ever saved an innocent man. The prisoner, gentlemen, is more than merely innocent of this black crime; he is the victim of some foul villainy, the black wickedness of which must some day stand forth fully revealed. That the chemist's visitor was not the prisoner, now most unjustly arraigned, but some one personating him—in his own Inverness abstracted for that purpose—may be taken as proved. So far that person remains unknown; his actual purpose is also unknown; but we fairly conclude it was intended to shift responsibility or raise false suspicions for dastardly, if not absolutely criminal ends. Retribution will certainly overtake him; even if he escapes the justice of man, he will assuredly be brought to judgment above."

This solemn peroration from an advocate whose favorite manner was burlesque and *persiflage*, evidently impressed the jury. Upon the shrewd old judge it had no visible effect; but Sergeant Frankfort, usually so stolid and impassive, who had long been fidgeting in his seat, exchanging whispers with Mr. Tinson or the Treasury solicitor, and noisily turning over the pages of his brief, rose in manifest wrath.

"I altogether protest," he began sharply, "against the line taken by the counsel for the prisoner. They have sprung a mine on us without notice or warning. I ought to have claimed an adjournment, but I hope, by postponing my cross-examination until now, that I shall be able to demolish the defence, and disabuse your minds, gentlemen, of any false impression raised by the opposite side's contention. He would have you believe that the prisoner himself did not go to Cleobury. Well, I am ready to concede so much. He may have been personated by another. Why not another on his behalf? What if it can be shown that this unknown and mysterious personage, according to Mr. Blackstone—but not so utterly unknown, I contend—was acting as the prisoner's agent and bailee? Recall William Gibbings.

"Now, sir!" He turned sharply on Gibbings, who met his fierce glance and sharp speech unabashed and undismayed. "Answer my questions, truthfully and without beating about the bush."

"I mean to do so," replied Gibbings stoutly—"there is no need to tell me that."

"We shall see. Now, tell me, how long have you been in the prisoner's service?"

"Fifteen years."

"You were in the same regiment with him. Were you his servant then?"

"Yes. The Colonel picked me out soon after I was dismissed recruit-drill."

"And you have been with him ever since? Do you get good wages? What is your place worth?"

"I have no wish to change. The Colonel has always been very good to me."

"And you give him implicit devotion in return. Such fidelity is quite touching. But we must be a little more precise. What are your wages? I repeat."

"Seventy, and three suits a year."

"New? Made to order? Don't the Colonel's old clothes come your way?"

"Yes; they have always been my perquisite."

"Do they require much altering?"

"No; I can wear them mostly as they are."

"Indeed! In fact, you and the Colonel are much of a size; same height, same build?"

"I believe so."

"Remarkable coincidence that," said the Sergeant with meaning, as he looked shrewdly at the jury, and paused. Then twisting his wisp of a gown afresh round his big body, and giving his small wig a new toss on his big head, he proceeded.

"You were greatly trusted by the Colonel, I understand—in all his secrets, quite his confidential man, eh?"

"I can't say that. But he often gave me private jobs to do."

"You went messages? Paid his bills, settled for him with betting men, and so forth?"

"I have done all that—at different times."

"And rendered him an account, I suppose,—a true and faithful account?"

"I hope so."

"Verbally; in writing; how?"

"Not in writing; I can count up, make figures abit, but I can't write—not a line."

In spite of the control he exercised over himself, the old Sergeant's face fell. The whole fabric of fresh implication he had so cunningly contrived at once collapsed and fell to the ground.

He would not yield his point, however, quite without a struggle. Paper and ink were called for, and the witness was desired by the jury to show what he could do. Gibbings went to work with the best will in the world, but the result was a scrawl like that of an imitative monkey, or an uneducated child.

Gibbings could not have signed the poison register. It was not he that had personated Colonel St. Evelyn.

The prosecution was worsted; that was evident from the last despairing efforts made by Sergeant Frankfort. He dwelt on the hesitation of Farmer Holt as to the date of the sale of the roan horse; he laughed at the diary and its entries, which might have been made at any time long after the event; he stigmatized Gibbings's evidence as though the witness had already been convicted of perjury.

But there was no getting over the one broad fact—that at the time the chemist Gravely swore the prisoner was in his shop buying arsenic, he, Colonel St. Evelyn, according to another man's oath, was in a dogcart at least twenty miles away.

The latter evidence came no doubt from an adherent, a creature, possibly, of the Colonel's; but there was nothing adduced to impugn his credibility, and it must be difficult for the jury to ignore such direct testimony.

This in a few words was the judge's summing up. There was doubt, more than doubt, in favor of the prisoner, and by every principle of law and justice he must have the benefit of it.

The jury took time to deliberate; they did not return to the court for three hours. But when they appeared, "Not guilty" was the verdict, as all who had followed the trial expected.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

THE great Thorpeshire *cause celebre* did not end with the trial. The *pros* and *cons*, the prosecution and defence, the whole of the evidence—all these were fully and minutely discussed throughout the country and beyond.

Local opinion was divided, but it was mostly unfavorable to St. Evelyn. The malcontents, as usual, made most noise, and as they were led by the spiteful garrulity of General Wyndham-Parker, it was not strange that the hostile view prevailed.

That Gibbings had forsaken himself was pretty generally believed. People even went so far as to give the exact price he had been paid. Five hundred pounds down, and the goodwill of the "Cow and Pail;" not dear; surely it was well worth all that to escape hanging.

St. Evelyn had escaped—narrowly. His life was saved, but was it worth saving? He was still branded with the mark of Cain. White-washed, but not absolved; acquitted, but still suspected. His future lot in life was scarcely enviable. He might be exonerated by the letter of the law, but he was still condemned by common report. People would look askance at him, would hesitate to give him their hands.

"What would he do? Leave the country? Remain to brazen it out, if possible to live it down?" This was what every one was asking.

It was a question no one would have had the hardihood or impertinence to put to St. Evelyn. But the reader shall be admitted to his confidence as he talked next morning with his wife.

They occupied rooms at the "Raven"; the Colonel had gone there straight from the Court.

"My only idea is to get away," said gentle Rachel still tearful and broken down by the reaction from the intense anxiety of the dreadful time they just passed through.

"So we will, dear, for a time," said her husband.

"It must be a long time. I don't seem to feel that I could ever face people, ever live in the county again."

"That will all pass off, my darling. You will forget, as they will, I hope. Besides, if we went away and stayed away, what would be said? That I was hiding my head. No, no. We'll go abroad now, to one of the German baths, or into the Tyrol—somewhere far off—and get back in time for the 1st September."

"You mean to shoot, Ferdinand, this year?"

"Why not? The young birds are plentiful, I believe, and there are no coverts like those at Straddlethorpe."

"Straddlethorpe? Surely you don't think of living at the Hall, Ferdinand?"

"Naturally I do. Why should I not live there? Of course, it's yours now; but I hope you don't want to turn me out of doors?"

"Ferdinand, all I have you know——"

"I might say that what's yours is mine, and what's mine is my own; but, my dear child, it is you yourself I value—only you."

St. Evelyn was not given to sweet speeches, and at the unwonted tenderness of his words his wife's brimming eyes once more welled over with grateful tears.

"I shall never forget what you have been to me, my good true

wife, in all this dreadful business. No woman was ever more staunch, and I shall never forget it, Rachel. I cannot say more."

He gave her one long loving kiss, and then resumed his matter-of-fact talk.

"The question is, how soon can you be ready to start? We might get to London to-night: Sarah and the children could follow us—"

"By all means. I have only to say good-bye to mamma."

"You mean to see Lady Lezaire?"

"Oh! Indeed I must. Surely you don't mind?"

"If you wish it, of course go. But I wouldn't if I were you."

"She is my mother, Ferdinand—"

"Upon my soul, I can't believe it. No two beings were ever more unlike."

"My mother means well—"

"Not to me, Rachel. She has hated me always, and now she has tried to ruin me utterly. It's all her doing, this shameful plot. I cannot speak of her, think of her, with any patience. You must not ask me to go and see her, Rachel, for I cannot, upon my soul. I'd rather not see her again."

"Not by-and-by, Ferdinand, when the first bitterness is over?"

"I'd rather not be under the same roof with her. I hope you don't want her to stay on at the Hall."

"I should be sorry—I should not like—to quarrel altogether with my mother," Rachel began, falteringly, but gained courage as she went on; "I could not send her away."

"She will save you the trouble, perhaps," replied the Colonel, evasively. He had quite made up his mind about Lady Lezaire, and as the reader knows, had conveyed a message to her through Mr. Tinson. But he could not pain his wife by telling her this just now.

"Mamma must feel how cruelly unjust her suspicions have been, and I am sure she will tell me how sorry she is that she misjudged you," Rachel said as she went off, hoping to act as peacemaker.

But there was no disposition to apologize in Lady Lezaire. She met her daughter defiantly, rudely.

"Have you come to give me notice to quit?" she asked abruptly.

"Oh, mother, how can you say or think such a thing?" answered Rachel.

"I say it because I know what I have to expect from Colonel St. Evelyn. He has plainly told me what. But, that apart, I should wish to put as far as possible between us. The world is large enough, I trust, to allow us both room, never to meet again. Of course I must go. But it is hard, desperately hard, to leave my home after all these years. To leave the Hall which was my husband's, and was my darling martyred son's—to go out into the world alone—"

"But why should you leave it, mamma, and why do you say that you are alone? You have me still, and the children, and you will always be welcome here."

"In your husband's house? For it is his really, not yours: all the property which has tempted him to do this wicked, murderous—"

"Mother, you shall not accuse him still, and to me. I will not listen. It's too bad, too wicked of you. After the trial too—"

"Do you think I am imposed upon or deceived by that shameful trick? Nobody is. The trial was a disgrace to the law. Gibbings and his master are well matched. But they will be found out some day, both of them, and will get their deserts."

"It is dreadful to hear you, mother. I could not believe that even your hatred of Ferdinand, your unkindness to me, would carry you so far," said little Rachel in a sad voice, but with much dignity, as she rose from her chair and moved towards the door. "I came, as I felt bound, full of respect and affection, to make peace before we went away."

"You are leaving England?" cried Lady Lezaire, with manifest satisfaction.

"Till September, at any rate."

It was only a short reprieve.

"When I presume you mean to take possession of your place. Very well; I quite understand. Long before September I shall have moved out of the way."

"Oh, mother, do not let us part like this!" said Rachel impulsively, with outstretched hand.

"I do not well see how it could be otherwise," answered her mother coldly, barely noticing the gesture. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE EXODUS.

PREPARATIONS for Lady Lezaire's departure were not delayed. They were hastened by the appearance at the Hall of a Mr. Maybrick, one of the firm of lawyers in Market Reepham.

He asked for Lady Lezaire, pleading most urgent business, which rendered a personal interview indispensable.

"I hope, my lady, you will accept my most humble apologies," he began. "I have an unpleasant, most unpleasant, duty to perform, and I feel for your ladyship."

"On whose behalf do you come?" asked Lady Lezaire, interrupting abruptly.

"Colonel and Mrs. St. Evelyn have intrusted me with the management of their affairs, and I am desired by him to convey his deep regrets, but to point out to you that, if quite convenient to yourself—"

"Don't beat about the bush, Mr. Maybrick. Colonel St. Evelyn has sent you to turn me out of Straddletorpe. Is that it?"

" Well, my lady, yes. You see, the St. Evelyn family is increasing, and—and—of course, I understand that it will be a great grief to you to leave your old home."

" Spare me your regrets, sir. When am I to go? At once?"

" Oh, my lady, there need be no such haste. In a month or two."

" I shall leave as soon as I can pack. And now, unless you have anything else to say on business, I will not detain you."

" Pardon me, there is one other point. Colonel St. Evelyn wishes me to convey to you his anxiety, his earnest wish—in a word, he is prepared to do what is right. He wishes to make you a handsome allowance——"

" To me! How dare you repeat such an insolent proposal?"

" It is well meant, I assure you. Colonel St. Evelyn is aware that your settlement, secured on the estate, is rather meagre. It was made when the revenues were less. For years now everything has prospered, as you know, and the Stradleighorpe property is worth nearly twice as much as at your marriage."

" If it brought in millions, I would not accept one farthing from Colonel St. Evelyn. I have my own portion."

" Yes, yes, my lady. But that, with your settlement, will bring you in, I am told, barely fifteen hundred a-year, and an offer to increase it by a couple of thousand is hardly to be despised."

" Do not speak of it again. Nothing would induce me to take it."

" Well, Lady Lezaire, I should be failing in my duty if I did not urge you to take the money, to which, I may add, you are fully and fairly entitled."

" Be good enough to let the matter drop. I have spoken finally, once and for all," said Lady Lezaire, very stiffly.

" I regret your decision, but must bow to it, and will pass on. I am also desired to place at your entire disposal anything you esteem of especial value—articles of furniture, books, pictures, other than those on a list I will give you; a pair of horses, one or more carriages——"

" Enough, enough!" shouted her ladyship. " Spare yourself and me. I want nothing, absolutely nothing. I will take nothing but what is my own. To prevent dispute, you shall have an inventory."

" It will not be necessary, really."

" But you shall. I insist, for my own satisfaction. Everything shall be set down, jewels, dresses, china, all my private possessions. My maid and Mrs. Leleu shall set about it at once."

Mrs. Leleu was summoned from the housekeeper's room and received her instructions.

" Can it really be true, my lady," said the housekeeper, "that you are going—that we are all to be sent away?" She spoke in a sad, dejected tone, and sorrow seemed to have subdued the fire of her restless eyes.

" It depends on yourselves, Mrs. Leleu, whether you go or stay. Colonel and Mrs. St. Evelyn will, no doubt, take on any who wish to remain with them."

"Most of us would prefer to accompany your ladyship."

It is kindly meant, but I shall have only a small establishment in future. I fear I shall not be able to afford a housekeeper. I must be my own. But you shall have an excellent character—the strongest recommendation, in fact."

"Your ladyship is too good," said Mrs. Leleu with a grateful curtsey.

"As for the other servants, they will look to you; but pray refer to me in any particular case."

"One thing I should like to ask, my lady, if you will allow me. It's about Hubert Podifat: what will become of him? The Colonel could never bear him."

"I will take care of Hubert, provide for him, for my dear Carysfort's sake."

"Thank you, my lady, on his behalf. I see so much of him, you will understand that I take an interest in the poor fellow."

"Yes, yes; I understand and appreciate your kindness. By all means tell him what I say."

All this was said in Lady Lezaire's boudoir, a room *en suite* with her bedroom, where she was superintending the operation of cataloguing and classifying. The work occupied the whole morning; in the afternoon it was resumed in the same rooms, and almost completed by evening.

"To-morrow," said Lady Lezaire, "we will take the Spanish chamber. There must be many things there—"

She did not finish the sentence. This Spanish chamber, so called from the old stamped leather that covered its chairs and lined its walls, was full of sad memories. It was the "best room," the bridal room, occupied always, at least after marriage, by the head of the family, the master and owner of Straddlethorpe.

It had been shut up, disused, for years now—ever since the death of Sir Percy Lezaire, who had been brought there speechless, partly paralyzed, after a terrible fall in the hunting field, and who breathed his last in it, on the great old-fashioned four-poster of carved oak, with its stiff, heavy hangings of silk brocade.

Lady Lezaire had hardly entered the room all these years. It was kept constantly closed, and the blinds were generally down. No one visited it but the housemaids periodically, with their tea-leaves and brooms and pails. The furniture was faded, out of date. It might remain so, Lady Lezaire had said; renovation and restoration would keep until the time came for Sir Carysfort to make his choice and bring home a bride to perpetuate an ancient line.

It seemed to poor Lady Lezaire a dreary, deserted place that morning, in the bright, strong sunlight when the blinds were drawn up; a sad, silent, tomb-like chamber, peopled even at mid-day with ghostly memories and grizly shapes.

The associations called up were most painful to Lady Lezaire, and she sat for some time with bent head and abstracted gaze while her attendants went on with what there was to do.

They opened wardrobes, pulled out drawers, tossing things about and rummaging everywhere, till Lady Lezaire roused herself at length to give instructions, and decide what should be left, what taken away.

The Spanish chamber was very large and commodious, of the kind occupied by a married couple in the days before dressing-rooms were deemed indispensable for the master and lord. A bath-room had certainly been added in Sir Percy's time, but he had been in the habit of making as much use of the Spanish chamber as Lady Lezaire. His spacious escritoire still stood in one of its oriel windows; a small book-case was let into the wall on one side, on the other was a cupboard with locked doors.

Lady Lezaire herself examined the drawers of the writing-table; while she sat at it so engrossed Mrs. Leleu, after trying several keys, had of her own accord opened the cupboard. Lady Lezaire was looking at the contents of the centre drawer—some bundles of receipts tied together with faded pale pink tape, a now nearly indistinct photograph of a Scotch mountain view, and several sheets of dust-laden note-paper when she heard Mrs. Leleu say—

"And this, my lady?"

The housekeeper held in her hand an old-fashioned desk or despatch-box of green-morocco, with a handle of dark-stained tarnished brass. It bore on the top a plain monogram, the letters "P.L." indistinct, but still legible.

"It was Sir Percy's, I believe. Where did you find it?"

"In this cupboard, my lady, on the top shelf."

"It must have lain there for years. How strange! I never seem to have missed it; but then that terrible time. Is there anything in it? Have you looked? Is it locked?"

"I'm not sure, my lady," said the housekeeper, placing the desk on the writing-table in front of her mistress.

"There was a lock, but a very simple one which was turned by almost the first key Lady Lezaire tried.

Inside was a packet of papers, tidily arranged, and labelled—

"To be opened after my death."

"My husband's handwriting!" cried Lady Lezaire. "And the date two days before his accident! What can this mean?"

With agitated fingers she hastily undid the packet. Several smaller papers fell out on to the table, but she still held a bulky MS., many sheets tied together bearing the same inscription as the outside of the packet—

"To be opened after my death."

Lady Lezaire cast her eyes nervously over the first few sentences, and almost immediately all the colour left her face.

"This is most extraordinary; I cannot understand," she faltered. Then turning to the housekeeper and maid, and with a great effort, she said, "Leave me, please. I must read these papers alone. Come back when I ring."

Next instant she was devouring the contents of the MS.

CHAPTER XXX.

SIR PERCY SPEAKS.

THIS is what Sir Percy had written :—

“ I have placed this letter where it must at once meet the eye of those into whose hands my papers fall.

“ It will be read after my death—immediately after, I trust; so that the bitter wrongs I have done the weak and helpless may be speedily righted. I cannot hope for forgiveness, but God is merciful as man is frail. May all whom I have injured, directly or indirectly, judge me as they shall hereafter be judged.

“ The story I have to tell, intimately and seriously affecting those nearest to me, those to whom I am bound by every sacred and natural tie, is one of shame and sorrow. The shame is mine; the sorrow, the cruel disappointment, the disgrace, the misery, will fall on the innocent and confiding victims I have so deeply and so basely wronged.

“ And yet I myself was a victim. I was not wilfully wicked; my fault, my trespass, my crime—I do not spare myself—overtook me unawares. Not till long afterwards, not till years had elapsed, and when it was altogether too late to retrace my steps, to retrieve my errors, did I learn how grievously I had sinned.

“ This is my story; it takes me far back, beginning in 185—, when I crossed the Atlantic in search of sport. It was my passion, sport of every kind; but I was perhaps most devoted to fishing. As I had heard almost fabulous accounts of the Nova Scotian lakes and rivers, I went first to Halifax, whence I could move out easily, making excursions for days, weeks even, if I was so inclined. The sport amply repaid me, and I spent quite six months most pleasantly between Halifax, Windsor, and Miramichi. I fished every mile of the strangely named rivers of these parts—the Nippissiquit, Musquidoboit, and Restigouche. There were many more, so I was told, at greater distances—some in New Brunswick, some in Newfoundland—and I was determined to try them all.

“ Money was no object to me; I have had ample means at my disposal always, and greatly to my own undoing. It has tempted me to self-indulgence, to gratify every fancy, every whim; but there—Being fond of the sea, and anxious to travel in comfort, I resolved to buy a yacht, or the best imitation of one to be had in these colonial waters. I secured a large Cape Cod fishing-boat of nearly 200 tons, with her tall spars and graceful lines—a clipper in every way, which the skilful shipwrights of Halifax gutted and reconstructed entirely. Her accommodation was ample, if not luxurious; her sailing power first-rate. I found an experienced skipper in the master of a coaster, and he brought with him an excellent crew.

“ I made many cruises in the *Evangeline*, as I christened my yacht, coast-wise, putting into little-known harbors or river-mouths, and lying there while I thrashed all the neighboring waters and

secured generally magnificent sport. After exhausting the New Brunswick rivers and those that fall into the Bay of Fundy, I shaped my course eastward, and passing Halifax entered the Gut of Canso, meaning to traverse the Bay Chaleur and try the fishing on the coast of Labrador.

"One Sunday morning we were abreast of Port Halibut, half-way through the Gut, when the turn of the tide sent the flood streaming through the narrow passage like a mill-race, so that we could make no head against it, and were compelled to anchor just where we lay.

"It was Sunday morning, I say, and I could hear the bells ringing out their summons from the little wooden belfry of the shingle-roofed church that nestled amidst the fir-woods. The settlement was but a small place; a collection of frame-built shanties belonging to the fisherfolk, whose boats, whalers or "Mudian rigs," were pulled up on the shore. But it was home-like, peaceful, and for once I was drawn to attend to duties too much and too long neglected in those careless, reckless days.

"The impulse was excellent, yet, sinful man that I am! would that I had never entered that simple, unpretending place of worship, with its bare rafters, whitewashed walls, and pinewood pews! I there met my fate; I first came under the black shadow that through a selfish temper and easily roused evil passions, has darkened and must embitter my life even to its closing hours.

"The service was of the simplest; the minister a plain-speaking, patriarchal old man, with flowing white beard; the small congregation devout and humble in aspect, all settlers and seafarers, clad in jerseys or homespun.

"One single exception met my surprised eyes. In a pew apart—the clergyman's—sat the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. A girl, young, graceful, but reverentially absorbed in her prayers, till, attracted irresistibly, as I thought, by my fixed and ardent gaze, she looked up and saw me for the first time.

"After that it was all over with both of us; I was enslaved, she fascinated. I knew it by her blushes and vain efforts to ignore my eager admiring eyes.

"It was the old story; love at first sight. After church I made her acquaintance formally, through her father the clergyman, who, after the simple fashion of the colony, hospitably welcomed me to Port Halibut. But Priscilla Spary and I seemed to have already known each other for years. Love lives fast, and our intimacy had grown in the passionate glances exchanged long before we learnt each other's names.

"There is no need to linger over this part of my confession; it is not indeed that of which I am most ashamed. There need be no disgrace in love—honestly given, freely returned. Had I followed the first true promptings of my heart, I should not have to write these words, pen this degrading story. I should have made honorable proposals to the woman of my choice, and married her

openly from her father's house, in his own church, blessed by his own hands.

" But I was led astray. I behaved like a blackguard. The pride of descent, of position, the recklessness my wealth and independence gave me, tempted me to sin. I took a base advantage of the trustful, unquestioning affection of an innocent confiding girl, and—woe is me!—dragged her down into the mire.

" Priscilla after much earnest solicitation, consented to elope with me in my yacht. One afternoon, according to prearranged plans, we slipped anchor, and with all sails set and the current with us, were carried out of the Gut on the top of the tide. Our course when once in the open sea lay eastward, westward, to any point of the compass, to any part of the wide world, just where we pleased; for I was careless of everything, blinded, absorbed by my passion for the foolish woman who had given herself up to me entirely and absolutely.

" Our cruise had lasted a couple of months or more before conscience awoke within me, and I realized how wicked a thing I had done. But now when I saw how bitterly and unceasingly she grieved, I was overwhelmed with contrition and remorse. What atonement was possible should be made at once. The yacht's head was shaped for shore, we landed at the first port, Louisville, and there, before the registrar of the little town, I made Priscilla Spary my wife.

" A generous though tardy acknowledgment this of my duty, my grave responsibility to her. It should have brought me contentment, abiding peace of mind. But strange to say, the marriage did not tend to increase our happiness; on the contrary, the sacred tie, instead of uniting, drove us asunder.

" No doubt I was mainly to blame. I grew discontented, exaggerated the drawbacks and disadvantages of our union. I seemed to see at last that the wife I had made mine under such peculiar conditions was scarcely a suitable mate; I felt I could not take her back to England, that she was unfit to assume her place in the society to which I belonged, that she would shame, perhaps disgrace me there.

" That these disturbing thoughts were cruel, far-fetched, I am positive now. But yet they grew on me, gained strength, and presently I showed that it was so. My demeanor changed; I was less loving, less considerate to my young wife. Trust a woman for discovering such a change! My wife, my poor Priscilla, changed too. At first she was half frightened; she seemed anxious, nervously eager to regain my good graces. But when she saw that my ill-humor did not disappear, she quickly realized that I had ceased to care for her. The shock must have been severe, but she proudly concealed it. Nothing betrayed her outwardly, beyond a stern impassive coldness, developing soon into sullen silence, varied only by fierce bursts of stormy upbraiding.

" The halcyon days were passed; courtship, honeymoon, happy.

ness—all were gone. It is bitterly painful to me to recall that time—the utter collapse, the complete shipwreck of our love. I am ashamed to remember how cruel I was: how bitterly I spoke to her; how I talked her down when she boldly essayed to reply; how we fought, and squabbled, and fought again. Ah me! would that I could live those days again! But there is still worse to tell. This is a full and unreserved confession, and I must abate nothing, must neither extenuate nor gloze over a single tittle of my crime.

"It was barely six months since we had left Port Halibut, yet I was already heartily sick of my wife, disgusted with the part I had played. We had been cruising in Canadian waters; I had made two long visits to Anticosti, and had fished some of the rivers on the northern shores of the St. Lawrence. Autumn was over, winter close at hand. I had already made up my mind to go back to Halifax, pay off the yacht, and then return to England. Part of my plan was to effect a separation at any price from my wife. I had great hopes that if I secured her a handsome allowance, she would leave me without regret, and gladly live always apart.

"The month was November, the weather bitterly cold; we were still in the narrow seas north of Nova Scotia, and my skipper hinted pretty plainly that he was afraid of ice. We must make at once for the open ocean, or run the risk of being shut in. Our most direct route was by the Bay Chaleur to the Gut of Canso and through it. But how could I show myself near Port Halibut again?

"I was spared the humiliation of running the gauntlet past a place with which I had been so dishonorably associated. Baffling head-winds blowing steadily from the S.W. met us day after day, and although they raised the temperature and diminished our fears of ice, they forbade us to hope to beat up to the mouth of the Gut. But by making very long tacks to the eastward, we succeeded in weathering Cape Breton, and having now lots of sea-room, were in a fair way to reach the southern coast of Nova Scotia. But while we were still northward of Sidney Point the wind dropped suddenly, and with it the temperature went rapidly down. Intense cold and a smooth sea was certain to facilitate the formation of ice-floes, and it was all-important that we should continue our voyage without a moment's delay. The captain was not less anxious than myself to get ahead. As the day drew on, and the weather promised worse and worse, I ordered the gig to be manned, and started off for Sidney, determined to hire a steam tug at any cost to take us round the point and on towards Halifax. Priscilla was in the cabin when I left the yacht; I did not ask her to accompany me. That very morning we had had a fiercer quarrel than any before, and I was glad to escape her company. No did she bid me good-bye, unless the fixed, almost insolent stare with which she treated me when I left the cabin could be so interpreted.

"It was a three hours' trip to Sidney, and when once more we rowed alongside, night had fallen; the clear, cold winter's night of these northern latitudes, twenty-five degrees of frost, a glassy sea,

under a sky gemmed with starry fire, and iridescent with the meteor-like flashes of the aurora. Benumbed with cold I went at once below, eager for food and warmth. My wife was not in the cabin. I looked in the sleeping berth; not there. I went on deck, meaning to make overtures of peace by gently chiding her for exposing herself to such bitter weather; she was nowhere on deck. Still more surprised, I inquired of the watch where Lady Lezaire was. And then to my astonishment they told me that shortly after I had gone off in the gig she had ordered the dingy to be brought alongside, saying she meant to row about to keep herself warm.

"They were pretty well accustomed to my wife's whims on board the *Evangeline*. They knew, too, that her will was law. However much we differed, she and I, no one on board was cognizant of the fact; and I to the last claimed the most punctilious deference for Lady Lezaire.

"She had gone off in the dingy more than three hours before; but where? Towards the shore; they had watched her. Her skill in managing the boat, her prowess with the sculls, were well known and much admired by my crew. No one for a moment feared, with such a smooth sea, under such a quiet sky, that she could come to any harm.

"But this prolonged absence seemed more than strange. Surely she ought to have returned to the yacht before dark. She must have got into some trouble, I thought; and without hesitation or discussion I again sent the boat's crew into the gig, and taking my seat in the sternsheets, went off in search of her.

"We rowed to and fro, shoreward and along it, backwards and forwards, for hours. Not a trace of the dingy was to be seen. It was midnight before I desisted from the seacrh, determined to resume it at dawn; and sore at heart, and with mind full of gravest misgivings, headed once more for the yacht.

"I scarcely slept that night, and long before daylight was again on the move. We rowed now towards the point, and skirted it, keeping close in-shore.

"A speck upon the sea, a boat drifting hither and thither in the tide—this was what I made out at last, half-way round the headland. Frantically I bade the men give way, and almost at racing pace we overhauled the object, to find, horror-stricken, that it was the dingy of the yacht, abandoned in the open sea.

"I jumped hastily on board, fearing almost to find my poor wife lying dead in the bottom, killed by cold and exposure. But no; the dingy was empty, although there were traces still of the unhappy creature who had been its last occupant.

"There lay a jacket, a hat, portions of a woman's dress,—all of them beyond question my wife's.

"What had become of her? Only one solution seemed probable, nay, possible. I noted the ominous absence of the kedge, the little grapnel-like anchor of the dingy, and the painter. She had drowned herself, I felt convinced; fastened herself to a heavy weight, to make sinking sure, and so had gone to a miserable death."

CHAPTER XXXI.

SIR PERCY CONTINUES.

" I WAS now perfectly satisfied that my wretched wife had committed suicide, driven to it, I told myself, with acute self-reproach, by my cruel and unworthy treatment. How, willingly, how eagerly I would have welcomed any evidence to show that I was wrong!

" But there could be no doubt of the fact. She had made away with herself, I felt sure. I went on at once to Sidney in the steam-tug, and there sought assistance; I despatched a whole posse of people, lumberers, backwoodsmen, long-shore folk, to make active search in the woods and along the coast, but not a trace of her was to be seen. She was drowned, gone to her last account.

" I lingered at Sidney for some weeks, nay, months, hoping almost against hope for some more positive news. The discovery of the body would of itself have been a melancholy gratification. But nothing was heard of it; no doubt the weights poor Priscilla had attached to her body prevented its reappearance on the surface of the waters.

" At length, having no longer the slightest doubt that my wife was dead, I journeyed overland, a nearly interminable sleigh-drive, to Halifax, where I took the Cunard mail-steamer and returned to England.

" It was not until the end of the next year that I recovered even partially from the shock I had received. But I found consolation then, and the promise of more substantial happiness, by another marriage. I paid my addresses to Lucy Mirfield, the daughter of a county neighbor, was accepted, and presently married. Our daughter, Rachel, was born next year; then after a long interval of nearly seven years came a son, and I was rejoiced to think that my little Carysfort would carry on our family line.

" My life was calm contented, with its sober, simple joys. I was happy with Lucy, a tender, loving helpmate; I adored my children; I was respected throughout the county; the times were prosperous, my estates and vested possessions increased. It was about six months after the birth of my son that I received the first terrible shock, and knew instantly that my peace of mind was shattered for ever and ever.

" One morning I found amongst my letters one bearing the Louisville postmark, written in a fair hand with which I was not unfamiliar. With a strange presentiment of coming trouble I hastily opened it and read as follows:

" 'PERCY LEZAIRE,—Only a mother's solicitude for her offspring drives me to break the solemn silence of years. I never intended to reopen the past. You thought I was dead, and so I was—to you. Nothing, I say, but a stern sense of duty to my child, my boy. Hubert, would console me for the bitter humiliation I now feel. I

had far rather lie at the bottom of the sea than appeal to your generosity for myself.

" But it is not as a suppliant that I approach you. I write now to vindicate my rights and those of your son. Only a few weeks since I learned that you had married again, that your new wife—poor fool! how you have deceived her!—had borne you a son and heir. There was rejoicing at Stradllethorpe; the village bells rang merry peals in welcome to the future owner of those broad lands.

" Percy Lezaire, it is my child that is the rightful heir—my child born within three months of the time when, wretched beyond endurance, goaded to desperation, I left you. Do your duty by him, or beware. I insist upon his immediate recognition. For myself I care little. At once acknowledge him as your heir, and you shall hear no more of me. Fail in this, and I will come forward, publishing my whole story. I can prove it, every syllable—that I, Priscilla Lezaire, am your lawful wife, and that she who now bears your name, with her base-born brats, usurps the place of me and mine.'

" I need hardly pause to describe the effect that this terrible communication had upon me. I read and re-read it, turning over its contents again and again, seeking for some shadowy hope that it was an impudent and fraudulent attempt to impose. By constant reiteration of this view I came ere long to believe it, and after a week or two I had almost succeeded in dismissing the letter from my thoughts. Surely the wisest course was to treat the whole affair with studied silent contempt.

" The meagre comfort I obtained from this decision was rudely assailed before three months had passed. A second letter came from Priscilla, more peremptory, more menacing in its tone.

" Still I could not bring myself to act; and a third letter found me still wavering, almost at my wits' end.

" This third letter might well distress me. It was not from Nova Scotia, but from London. Priscilla had come in person with her child, a boy now of eleven years, to prosecute her claims.

" It was impossible to delay longer. Some steps must be taken forthwith to satisfy Priscilla, to silence her, if possible to buy her off.

" I went alone to London that very day, to the address Priscilla gave me, a lodging-house in a street off the Strand. I saw her there, the true Lady Lezaire, wan and worn, but still handsome, and bearing herself proudly, despite her evident poverty and the meanness of her surroundings.

" The meeting was indescribably painful to both of us. The recollection of it alone is bitter; I will not linger over its details. For a long time Priscilla was defiant, implacable, but I won upon her at last entirely through the boy. By a distinct and solemn promise to watch over and provide for him, I persuaded her to waive her rightful pretensions and withdraw to Nova Scotia again. I agreed to make over to her at once a substantial sum in hard cash

to secure her against want, and to take charge of the boy myself. I swore by all I held most sacred to do my duty by him, and this letter, acutely painful as it is to me, is a most unreserved fulfilment, however tardy, of my oath.

"It was at this interview that I learnt how Priscilla had fared from the moment she had left the yacht. Her voyage in the dingy had been straight shoreward; she had landed under the headland where we had found the boat, had left portions of her clothing on board, and had removed the kedge and painter to bear out the idea of suicide, just as we had supposed.

"From the coast she had made her way through the woods to Louisville, where, her scanty resources failing her, she found refuge at length in the hospital, and here her child was born.

"The birth was registered, by a strange coincidence, at the very registry office where we had been married.

"As soon as Priscilla regained strength she had gone into service, and electing to remain at Louisville rather than be an object of scorn at Port Halibut, she presently found a comfortable place as housekeeper to a gentleman in the town. There she was living when the chance perusal of an English paper put her in possession of the facts concerning me, to which I have already referred.

"Priscilla promised me to leave England again without an instant's delay, and in order to expedite her departure, I went straight from the Strand to Lincoln's Inn Fields, where I made a garbled and incomplete confession to Mr. Harvey, the senior partner of Harvey & Tinson, our family solicitors. I told him that years previously I had formed a connection in Nova Scotia, one of which I had no reason to be proud, but that I did not desire to evade the responsibilities I had incurred.

"A child had been born, and I was anxious to do my duty by it. Of course I made not the slightest allusion to the legal ties by which I was really bound. To have confessed my marriage to Priscilla would have fallen like a thunderbolt on the dear ones at Stradde-thorpe, to spare whom, if I could, I was resolutely but culpably determined.

"Mr. Harvey heard my story with grim disapproval, but he could not withhold the advice and assistance I sought. He agreed to take charge of the boy, temporarily, until I could provide for him.

"On leaving the lawyers I cashed a cheque for £1500 at my bankers, taking the bulk of it in one hundred pound notes, which I handed over to Priscilla, my rightful wife, as the price of her perpetual silence. In exchange, but very reluctantly, and torn with passionate sorrow, she surrendered her son, my rightful heir. I never saw or heard of her again.

"The boy Hubert, now twelve years old, remained in Mr. Harvey's hands for some months, but the lawyer frequently urged me to relieve him of his charge. I wished to have the lad properly educated, and hoped Mr. Harvey would manage the whole business for me. But it was one that seemed extremely distasteful to the

lawyer, and I found myself compelled ere long to take it into my own hands.

"About this time a man who had been on a hunting expedition with me in the Far West, a practised backwoodsman, wrote begging to enter my service in England if I could get him a place. He was a splendid shot, and I made him under-keeper.

"It was on condition that he should adopt young Hubert, and give him his name. To remove him from Mr. Harvey's charge to his new home at the under-keeper's lodge, was a matter easily effected. As I write these lines the boy is there still; the boy who is really and rightfully the heir to the baronetcy and all the Stradde-thorpe estates."

The confession, so far as the facts conveyed, ended here. But Sir Percy once more took himself to task; with poignant upbraiding and self-reproach implored the pardon of those he had wronged.

One or two important documents were added to the confession in support of it. There were certified extracts from the registrar's book: one of Sir Percy's marriage with Priscilla Spary, witnessed by Hamish Groot, master mariner, and Peter Spofforth, both of the yacht *Evangeline*; the other certified the birth of the boy, Hubert Algernon Lezaire, at Louisville, on the 9th January, 185—.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IS HE THE HEIR?

OF the mingled feelings that oppressed Lady Lezaire after the perusal of this strange confession, indignation was scarcely the strongest. She would be more angry with her husband by-and-by, when the full measure of her disgrace and degradation were realized—when it came more forcibly home to her that she had never been married—that she was a mother but no wife—that her children were illegitimate, and that she had no right to the title of Lady Lezaire. She could not be expected to forgive Sir Percy Lezaire for exposing her, even unwittingly, to such reproaches as these.

But her first emotion now was a sort of sardonic satisfaction.

"He will lose it all—that wretch! In the bitterness of his disappointment I could almost rejoice at this dreadful blow."

This brought her to consider what action she ought to take, if any, and when.

"They burn my hands, these papers. I feel I have no right to hold them a moment longer than I can help. They are legal documents, and must be given up to the lawyers. Mr. Tinson, I suppose, has left Market Reepham. He must come back at once."

Lady Lezaire gathered up everything, and returning to her own sitting room, carefully locked up the despatch box with its contents.

Then a telegram was sent off to Essex Street, Strand, requiring Mr. Tinson's immediate presence at the Hall.

The lawyer came down early next day, and was immediately taken to see Lady Lezaire.

"It is the strangest story I have met with in my whole professional experience," he confessed frankly, when he had read all the papers. "Strange, and, to me, almost incredible."

"But there are the facts, Mr. Tinson. You cannot go against the written evidence."

"I don't know what to say. You are quite satisfied, quite positive this is Sir Percy's handwriting? You have seen more of it than I have."

"Oh yes; I have no reason to doubt it. It is weak, variable, but I feel sure it is his."

"What beats me is the concealment of the confession till the present moment. Let me see, when did he die?"

"On December the 11th, 1871."

"Eight years ago. And these papers, of the most vital importance, have lain hidden all this time. Extraordinary!"

"Not when you consider where they were."

"But how can they have escaped the executors? My partner, old Mr. Harvey, was here for a week or more going through the deceased's papers, just after Sir Percy died."

"He could not have visited the Spanish Chamber. So far as I can remember, the room was shut up immediately after the funeral. No one entered it then, or has since, except the maids."

"Well, I am answered, but not entirely satisfied, Lady Lezaire. You see such tremendous issues hang on this confession."

"As regards the property?"

"That in the first place. Then as regards yourself—"

"Oh, never mind me. Let justice be done; let the rightful heir succeed, and without delay. He has too long been kept out of his own."

"Yes, yes; but we must proceed regularly, Lady Lezaire. It will be necessary first to make every step sure. No notice of ejectment—and that is what will have to be served on Mrs. St. Evelyn if the case is to go on—"

"Why, of course it is to go on. The St. Evelyns must be dispossessed; he must be forced to disgorge the plunder he has taken such dreadful means to secure."

"Forgive me, Lady Lezaire. Colonel St. Evelyn has been acquitted by a jury of his fellows. You must not make such insinuations."

"The point is whether you will act in this matter, or shall I call in some other lawyer?"

"On behalf of the claimant, this Hubert? You would make his case your own?"

"I do not hesitate—if he has the best right to be master here."

"Of course, I owe no allegiance to Colonel St. Evelyn. On the contrary, he has taken the affairs of the Straddlethorpe estates al-

together out of our hands. But it is a serious thing to declare war, to commence a suit of ejectment, in fact. We must see our way first quite clearly ; we cannot take up such a case, you understand, merely on 'spec.' It would not be reputable—we have our professional character to think of, Lady Lezaire—nor safe."

" You might be out of pocket, you mean, if the case went against you ?"

" Frankly, yes. We should lose heavily, and not only in money."

" So you refuse to take it up ?"

" Softly, softly, my dear lady. I do not say that. But I must make some enquiries, some preliminary investigation. I must verify some of these facts —"

" For instance ? Is not the evidence of my husband's confession enough ?"

" No ; these marriage and birth certificates must be authenticated ; and the claimant, Sir Hubert, as he ought to be called if his case is clear, must be identified."

" By whom ? How ?"

" Our Mr. Harvey is old, and has retired from the business ; but he is perfectly clear-headed still. He will surely remember the boy Sir Percy intrusted to him, and can say whether he is one and the same with this Hubert Podifat, as he was called, who has lived here in Straddlethorpe ever since. By the way, what is he like, this Hubert ? Is he still here ?"

" Have you never seen him ?"

" Once or twice casually. But I know nothing of him—of his disposition, character, qualities, I mean. Would he do credit—in plain English, is he at all equal to the great change he may expect in his fortunes ?"

Lady Lezaire shook her head doubtfully.

" Perhaps we had better have him up here," she said. " You can speak to him and judge for yourself."

" I don't think it would be quite wise. It might get about ; be misunderstood. Or it might raise false hopes in the young man. I would rather come upon him unawares. Where is he most likely to be found ?"

" In the stable-yard, I expect. That is his home by preference."

" I'll go there. If I don't see him, I may come across some of the men, who may tell me something about him."

" They won't tell you much good, I'm afraid. He has never been very popular with our people. My poor dear boy made such a favorite of him, I think they resented it."

Mr. Tinson, who knew his way about the Hall, presently left her ladyship and went towards the stables. He found old Peters, in the harness-room alone.

" Morning, sir. Young Podifat ? No, sir, I ain't seen him, and I don't want to," growled the old coachman.

" What's the harm in the young man ? You don't seem to like him."

"No, sir, I don't; and never have since the black mare was foundered all through his mad driving home from Thorpe Bosworth Fair."

"I thought he was fond of horses."

"Fond of gruelling and ill-using them, and galloping their tails off. Not but what he's got a neat seat and rare hands on a horse. Only he's not to be trusted with the ribbons; a wild reckless chap when he drives."

"Is he steady—otherwise?"

"Steady!" repeated Peters, with a sardonic whistle—"as steady as skim milk on a shovel. I wouldn't trust him—not to feed frogs with a spoon. What do you say, Mr. Staines? Would you call young Podifat steady?"

Staines was the head-keeper, who came in at this moment—a short, thick-set man, with thick bushy whiskers, and the calm, cold blue eye of the true sportsman.

"It depends. Steady enough after fur or feather; but when it comes to books—well, a fly-book's the kind he likes to read."

"Can he tie a fly?"

"With any one, or kill a fish. A dead shot, too. It's well for him he's had the run of the shooting and the river, or he'd a been nabbed for poaching long ago."

"A keen sportsman, eh?"

"But not a fair one, sir. He's only keen to kill. If I'd let him he'd have netted the weir, or trapped the pheasants, or shot a hare in its form. Anything to kill—he's that cruel. You see it with the dogs. He can break them—no one better—but it's with cruelty. He's cruel hard."

Thorndike, the farm bailiff, whom Mr. Tinson found in his little room near the servants' offices, was still more condemnatory.

"I could never see any good in him, sir—never. An idle, useless, ill-mannered cub—that's what I call him. Never would do a hand's turn of work, except perhaps at hay-making time, and then he was always romping with any of the saucy queans that would let him."

"Was he a favorite with them?"

"As much as such a black-muzzled, cross-grained young chap could be; and when he let the beer-jar alone."

"Aha! Drinks, eh?"

"He's not quite a sot yet, Mr. Tinson, that's all I can say. But I never knew him refuse a horn of cider or a mug of ale have seen him muzzy and dazed times out of number."

"He's not much likely to do much good for himself, then."

"Not he; and no credit to any one else."

"What's he fit for, Mr. Thorndike? Anything? Her ladyship would like to do something for him—he can't stay here with the Colonel, you know."

"If he did, he'd soon make acquaintance with the Colonel's hunting-crop, I expect, and the best thing for him. The Colonel did send him to Coppocks, the land-surveyors in Market Reepham. But that's

too regular work for him. I should say, send him out to the colonies, the backwoods where old Podifat came from, or somewhere where he could lead a wild harum-scarum life, shoot game without a licence, and cook it in the open air. He'll never do much good in these parts, or anywhere else at home."

Not a very encouraging report of the rightful heir to Straddle-thorpe; Mr. Tinson felt that. And if he had any doubts whether these evil reports were over-colored by malice or personal dislike, more direct and unmistakable evidence was now forthcoming.

As he still talked with the bailiff, an angry scolding voice—scolding in fierce contemptuous tones—was heard in the passage.

"Where have you been? It's an hour past dinner-time. What kept you? Can't you speak?"

"It's Mrs. Leleu," said Thorndike, grinning. "She's rating him soundly; that's her way, but it'll do him no good."

"Podifat?"

Thorndike nodded, and held up his hand.

"Can't you answer?" went on Mrs. Leleu, and the vigor of the question was obviously increased by a rude shake. "Where have you been all the morning?"

"In—in—down Somerleaze Spinney," was the thick, indistinct, stammering reply.

"It's a lie; I know it by your voice. You've been boozing, muddling away your little wits, you filthy, drunken sot. Where? Come, tell me; I will know."

"At the 'Cow and Pail.'"

"Where did you get the money? I've told them not to serve you. It's that brazen slut, Bet Bickerdike—but I'll get her turned away from the bar; you'll not get fuddled there again."

"I like Betty; Betty likes me," hiccupped Hubert.

"Go in with you, you low, disreputable young blackguard! Go in, and sleep off your drink. I'll tell you what I think of you when you're sober; not now," cried Mrs. Leleu, and her voice was heard no more.

"She doesn't spare him," remarked Mr. Tinson, with a half laugh. But he was thinking seriously on what he had heard, wondering how the housekeeper would bear herself should this *mauvais sujet* prove to be the real master of the Hall.

"I believe in her heart she's fond of him," said Thorndike. "You see he's always lived with her, and it's natural she should wish to keep him straight."

"Has he any regard for her?" Mr. Tinson asked, speculating a little on their future relations should Hubert come in for the title and estates.

"Hardly. Anyway he don't show it, and by-and-by he'll abuse her, call her every name, to any one who'll listen. There ain't no gratitude in him, or proper feeling. To my thinking he's a rank bad lot."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

EJECTMENT SERVED.

COLONEL ST. EVELYN had travelled with his family into the very heart of Europe. It had been his wife's earnest wish, and he himself was nothing loath, to put long leagues between them and the painful episodes through which they had just passed. He was willing enough to avoid English people, to escape English gossip, and to see none of the papers which still commented on and freely criticised "his case."

He had found the peaceful seclusion he sought at a little lake-side town in the Salzkammergut, at pretty, primitive Hallstatt, under the wing of the snowy Dachstein, and on the brink of the green waters of the deep mountain-tarn.

They were perfectly happy here, revelling in their retirement and in the simple pleasures the place afforded. St. Evelyn found trout innumerable in the rushing torrents that fed the lake; they made long fishing expeditions, husband and wife and little ones, all about; where the distances were great, Rachel and the children were carried in the local sedan chairs; but the Colonel, still strong and sturdy, tramped everywhere, delighting in the vigorous exercise. Of an evening they went out on the tranquil lake, the whole party easily accommodated in the flat-bottomed boat rowed by stalwart peasant-girls; the Colonel lying back lazily watching his cigar-ash, while Rachel read to him or they listened to the children's prattle.

It was an Arcadian existence, calm, happy, and uneventful; one of those lulls in the storms and troubles of our earthly journey which all of us but the most miserable experience at times;—a period of absolute repose which is too often the precursor of sorrow and misfortune, just as the whirlwind is preceded by a deathlike stillness in the physical world.

"Too bright to last," Rachel had said that morning, with a not uncommon presentiment of evil near at hand.

It came that very day, in the shape of a letter from Mr. Tinson—a business letter, brief and to the point, with a summons to surrender so summary and unconditional that St. Evelyn felt the case against him must be strong.

"As the husband and nearest representative of Mrs. Rachel St. Evelyn," wrote Mr. Tinson, "I beg to give you notice of ejectment from the Stradklethorpe estates. The existence of a son of Sir Percy Lezaire by an earlier marriage has been in our opinion satisfactorily and conclusively proved, and the rightful heir has placed the matter in our hands. If you are disposed to contest the claim, be so good as to notify us of the names of the solicitors acting on your and your wife's behalf, who will accept service, as we shall carry the matter at once before the court.—Your obedient servant,

"HILARY TINSON."

"What is it, Ferdinand dear?" Mrs. St. Evelyn asked. "You seem put out. Won't you tell me? Do not keep anything from me now, after all we have gone through."

"I have nothing to conceal, only I don't understand quite. The thing's so sudden, so incomprehensible, so strange. But you should know; you may help me, dear. Did you ever hear that your father had been married twice?"

"What! before he married mamma? Oh no, never! It cannot be possible. Who says so?"

"It is positively asserted here," said the Colonel, holding out the letter. "More, that there was a child by this first marriage."

"Who is that from?"

"Mr Tinson."

"Surely mamma does not know of this?"

"There is no mention of Lady Lezaire, but I seem to see her hand in it. A fresh attempt to ruin us. Really, Rachel, your mother—"

"And what became of this child?" asked Mrs. St. Evelyn, avoiding all reference to Lady Lezaire.

"Alive and kicking, if this letter is to be believed. Means mischief, too, both he and his backers."

"But I cannot conceive how it could have happened. Where has he been all this time, and why kept in the background?"

"If it's what I suspect, we all know him well enough. There was a mystery about him, perhaps, but he was always to the fore. A fine creature to be a baronet!"

"You know him, then. Of whom are you speaking?"

"Why, of Hubert Podifat. He must be the new pretender."

"Hubert my father's son. How extraordinary! It is the first time I ever heard of such a thing."

"Naturally they kept it from you, my dear. But I knew, and that is one reason why I always wished to get him away from the Hall. It did not seem nice, his being brought up and so intimate with poor Carysfort."

"Hubert Podifat! What does it all mean? Will he take everything? must we give way? Oh, Ferdinand, think of our children!"

"Their interests shall not be lightly surrendered, my darling,—never fear. Brag is a good dog, but Holdfast is a better. We've got the estates, and we'll stick to them. The idea of giving way before this nameless, base-born scapegrace!"

"God will defend the right, my dear husband," said Rachel.

"And he helps those who help themselves. I mean to fight this," said St. Evelyn resolutely, as he rose from his chair and walked towards the hotel.

"Where are you going, dear?"

"To tell the maids to pack. We must catch the afternoon express for Munich, and hurry home as fast as we can."

So satisfied was St. Evelyn in his own mind of the dishonesty of this new claim, that he went at once to Mr. Amos Davis, whose

practice was mainly devoted to the exposure of fraud, and put the whole affair into his hands.

"They mean business," said Mr. Davis, quietly, "and they must have something to go upon. Harvey & Tinson, you may be sure, would take up nothing on "spec."

"But what foundation can there be?"

"That's what they will have to tell us. The law will require them to show something more than strong presumption. They must have facts, or a good imitation of them, or the case cannot proceed."

"You mean to call upon them, then, to show their hand?"

"Quite so. We shall write on your behalf, utterly scouting and repudiating the claim, and demanding its immediate withdrawal, or a full statement of the evidence on which they presume to base it."

"Suppose they refuse?"

"They won't refuse us: no one does. It is pretty generally acknowledged, I think, that people who consult us suspect foul play. I have never met this Tinson yet in business, and I'm not sorry to have a tussle with him."

The St. Evelyns remained in London, so as to be within easy reach of the lawyers, and on the third morning a telegram summoned the Colonel to Mr. Amos Davis's chambers.

The astute lawyer looked grave.

"We have Harvey & Tinson's answer this morning, full and explicit enough. I may tell you it has taken me an hour or more to digest."

"What do you think of it? Have they a leg to stand on?"

"They have got a very strong case, Colonel St. Evelyn, if these facts can be substantiated," and the lawyer put his finger on a bulky parcel of documents. "If there is any truth in these statements, and the documentary evidence will bear examination, I should be disposed to recommend—"

"Surrender? Nothing would persuade me to give up."

"Compromise is what I should suggest. Do not contest the claim. Let this Hubert have the title, and keep all you can in the shape of cash."

"Compromise? Never!"

"I should be failing in my duty if I recommended anything else; always supposing, you understand, that the case will bear the test of inquiry. If it does, and you have resisted, you will find yourselves—Mrs. St. Evelyn and the children, I mean—left out in the cold."

The Colonel expostulated, and protested with much vehemence and force of language that nothing on earth should induce him to yield to this preposterous attempt to ruin him. But when the long flow of fierce words was exhausted, and Mr. Davis set forth the facts as alleged by the opposite side, he rather changed his tone.

"You mean to tell me that the marriage with the present Lady Lesaire was void and illegal?"

"Undoubtedly so, if"—with strong emphasis on the if—"these papers are not forgeries."

"That must be tested forthwith."

"It is what I was going to propose," said Mr. Davis. "We must send a trustworthy agent to Nova Scotia without delay, who will make it his business to verify the entries in the Louisville register, and get what information he can about this Priscilla Spary, the baronet's first wife."

"He will find out, I feel confident, that it is all a trumped-up story."

"Let us hope so," said Mr. Davis, pursing up his lips. "But I confess at the first blush of the thing it bears the impress of probability, if not of veracity. The story is circumstantial and straightforward; I cannot find a flaw in it, nothing is wanting. Our man may detect something which will help us, but upon my soul I would strongly advise a compromise—if you can get it. Remember the alternative."

"If we lose the case my wife loses Straddlethorpe."

"More than that. The establishment of the first marriage would invalidate your wife's settlements, and would deprive her absolutely of all she inherited under her father's will."

"She would, in fact, be illegitimate?"

"That is exactly the state of the case. The present Lady Lézaire would, in fact have no right to the name, nor her children to inherit from Sir Percy."

"It would go hard with us indeed if this pretension was accepted in law."

"I don't see how it is to be opposed, unless something turns up in Nova Scotia."

"You will send a man at once, armed with the necessary instructions?"

"I have already selected him. There is only one formality wanting. You will excuse me, Colonel, but business is business, and in matters of this kind it is our invariable rule to ask for something in hand. We must have an advance to cover preliminary expenses."

"With all my heart. We are playing a big game, and I'm not afraid of the stakes. What shall it be? Two or three hundred?"

"Your cheque for £250 will do at first. But I must tell you fairly we shall soon want more."

"Pray, draw upon me for whatever is necessary," said the Colonel off-hand, but with by no means a light heart. Money was plentiful with him just then, but it was Straddlethorpe money, every penny of which he might yet be called upon to account for. Of himself he had but little to meet the demands of a great and expensive lawsuit.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SUIT PROGRESSES.

MR. TINSON had not been idle. From the day he had seen Lady Lezaire and read Sir Percy's confession, he had devoted himself to getting up the case. Certain preliminary facts must be established before he could move an inch, and his first energies were concentrated on these.

Various certificates, as I have said, were attached to the documents found in Sir Percy's despatch-box. These were verified copies of the Louisville register, drawn up in the usual way on printed forms belonging to the office and signed by the registrar.

Mr. Tinson had little doubt that they were authentic, but he deemed it advisable to despatch a clerk to Nova Scotia to compare them with the originals. The points in the case were such as were likely to strike every lawyer alike, and this comparison had commended itself also to Mr. Davis. Another point was the need for identifying the first wife, and Mr. Tinson's clerk, as well as Mr. Davis's agent, had been instructed to make inquiries about Priscilla Spary.

These were matters which Mr. Tinson, fully occupied with the management of a large business, was obliged to delegate to a subordinate. But there was one more which he could attend to himself. Little less important than this documentary evidence was the identification of the new claimant. Unless it could be clearly proved that Hubert Podifat was the boy whom Sir Percy had acknowledged as his son, the whole case fell to the ground.

There was only one person living who could swear to Hubert, and this was the aged Mr. Harvey, who was the head of the firm in Sir Percy's time. The old gentleman lived at Brighton, enjoying the late autumn of a long life, a last flicker of vitality, a sort of St. Martin's summer, at that bright and joyous retreat. He was very infirm, and lived the ascetic regular life of a confirmed invalid. Two hours in a bath-chair about mid-day, two hours in a victoria up and down the King's Road and the Madeira Drive in the afternoon, a rigorously careful diet, and the absence of all emotions, was the unvarying rule of his life. But he was still clear-headed, and he took an old man's interest in any business matters in which he had been himself associated. Mr. Tinson was well aware of this, and gladly availed himself of his senior's lights and advice in all that dealt with the past.

With regard to Hubert, he was anxious, if possible, to obtain some recognition from Mr. Harvey by surprise. Of course it was easy enough to let the old man into the whole secret and ask him point blank whether he remembered the boy and under what circumstances. If he could bring the young fellow into Mr. Harvey's presence unexpectedly, and win from him any spontaneous acknow-

ledgment of his identity, it would immensely strengthen the case; still greater value would attach to it if this recognition took place in the presence of others.

This idea gained so much favor with Mr. Tinson, that he set himself to execute it carefully and formally. An application was made to a judge in chambers to appoint commissioners to take evidence in a certain matter, and two learned but not overworked barristers were instructed accordingly. They were to go to Brighton, call on Mr. Harvey, and put certain question to him in the case of *Lezaire v. St. Evelyn*.

The next step was to bring Hubert Podifat upon the scene. This required some circumspection, but was not really difficult for a young man fond of pleasure.

It was an understood thing that some employment was to be found for Hubert, and that he was to leave the Hall before the return of the St. Evelyns. Mr. Tinson, who was in regular correspondence with Lady Lezaire, mentioned to her his wish to bring young Podifat and Mr. Harvey together, but reminded her that it must take place at Brighton, as Mr. Harvey was too infirm to travel. It would be necessary, therefore, to get the young man there casually, as it seemed; and the best way to accomplish this, wrote Mr. Tinson, would be to send him down to see how he would like to be bound to a veterinary surgeon at Brighton.

Hubert Podifat had often heard of Brighton, and jumped at the idea of visiting it.

Mr. Tinson met him, and went through the form of introducing him to the great Mr. Vasey who followed the double profession of riding-master and "vet." Hubert's future employment was to follow whichever of these two lines he preferred.

"You can think it over, Podifat," said Mr. Tinson, "and come round to-morrow morning and give me the answer. I am staying at Royal Crescent. Come punctually at eleven, as I shall be going out. Here is one of my cards: send it up when you arrive."

Next morning Mr. Harvey was in his arm-chair at the bay-window overlooking the sea, and talking past business with Mr. Tinson.

"I forgot to tell you," said the latter, "I have a consultation this morning. I met Loader and Perrymore yesterday in the King's Road, and they promised to look in. Do you mind my seeing them here?"

"Not at all," said the cheery old gentleman, "if you don't mind talking before me. I love to hear what's going on."

The two counsel were introduced in due form, and while they were still interchanging civilities with the veteran solicitor, Mr. Harvey's man came up with a card to Mr. Tinson.

"To see you, sir."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Harvey," said Tinson, turning apologetically, "but a young fellow has called with some important papers. May he bring them up?"

"By all means. Pray make yourself at home here."

Next minute Hubert Podifat entered. Mr. Tinson rose and took him to the second window, where he held him in a strong light facing Mr. Harvey for two or three minutes or more.

"That will do," he said, as he showed him to the door, where he added in a low voice, "sit down in the dining-room, will you? I may want you again."

"Here, here, Tinson!" cried Mr. Harvey, excitedly. "Who was that young man?"

The bait had evidently been taken.

"I seen him before, I am sure," went on Mr. Harvey.

"Does he remind you of any one?" and Mr. Tinson, as he spoke, looked significantly at the two lawyers.

"It is the boy himself; I know him perfectly. His name is—" then he checked himself suddenly—"but I had forgotten; I had promised to say nothing about it. Only it is so long ago, and the principal party has been dead and gone these years."

"Sir Percy Lezaire, in fact."

Mr. Harvey nodded. "As you know, I need not mind speaking. That young fellow's name is, or used to be Hubert Podifat—of that I am satisfied. I never forget a face, old as I am."

Mr. Tinson burst out laughing, and honestly confessed the whole stratagem, explaining in detail the exact position of affairs. Mr. Harvey expressed himself perfectly willing to assist the law; he was duly sworn, and the evidence taken down by two commissioners. Hubert Podifat being recalled to the drawing-room to be positively identified as the lad whom he had seen with Sir Percy Lezaire. What Sir Percy had said of the lad's parentage and near relationship to himself was also sworn to by old Mr. Harvey, but not in Hubert's presence. So far as the identification of the claimant and the tracing of his movements from boyhood to the present time, the case was perfectly clear.

Thus the first important step was secured. Satisfactory news soon followed from beyond the Atlantic: the certificates had been found to tally exactly with the entries in the registers; a visit to Canso Straits established the existence of the Sparys, and the story of Priscilla's elopement was still remembered, although no relations survived.

This was the report Mr. Tinson received. Something very similar reached Mr. Davis, and through him St. Evelyn.

Yet the Colonel was by no means disposed to throw up the sponge. He still talked big.

"They must turn us out neck and crop," he said. "I will go for nothing less than an order of Court."

They were back at Stradllethorpe now, and their reappearance at such a time, when the ownership was still in doubt, and Mrs. St. Evelyn's rights strongly contested, told in his disfavor. It would have been better taste to have stayed away. Lady Lezaire had left; the claimant, Hubert Podifat, was content to remain in the background. Why did St. Evelyn parade himself so publicly at the

place he had gained by such questionable means? This was what many people said, especially the Wyndham-Parkers, and the strong faction that was hostile as ever.

But the Colonel was not to be put down by clamor, to be driven out by any unofficial irresponsible opinions. He meant to hold his own stoutly to the last, yielding his ground upon compulsion only inch by inch, and resisting to the uttermost this new and equally wicked attempt to ruin him.

"It shall go into Court," he said, "into every Court. If one is against us I'll try the one above, and so on to the very highest."

Mr. Davis warned him.

"Think of the enormous expenses."

"They will come out of the estate."

"If you win, yes. But if you lose?"

"What else can I do? Am I not bound to defend my wife's interests, my children's inheritance? Of course it's a serious matter. There's the wickedness of it. The whole thing is a monstrous fraud, a direct attempt at robbery. Either way it must cost us thousands."

"That's why I have always recommended compromise."

"Would you compromise with a thief who had you by the throat?"

"Well, I don't know; but if my life was in danger I think I should give in."

"I have been brought up to fight," said the Colonel, "against any odds, and that's what I mean to do now."

CHAPTER XXXV.

HUBERT SHOWS FIGHT.

It had been Mr. Tinson's wish to keep Hubert Podifat as long as possible in the dark with regard to his future prospects. There was manifest injustice in encouraging hopes that might prove delusive. The young man was not of a sort to bear good or evil fortune philosophically. It was wisest to postpone all news of the one until it became reasonably probable—to minimize the other by making no premature announcement.

But when the case was ripe for trial, and the first application to eject was to be made in open court, secrecy was no longer possible: the whole story would become public property through the law reports. Mr. Tinson felt that his client had now a right to know what was being done in his behalf.

All this time Hubert had remained at Brighton. The kind of life he led there was far from displeasing to him. He liked his work at Mr. Vasey's, so far as it was possible for him to like any work. It was not hard. The study of horseflesh was of the practical kind, and he was already well grounded in the subject. Veterinary science,

however, occupied but little of Hubert's time. He was such an excellent horseman that he could make himself very useful to Mr. Vasey, who did more as a riding master than as a vet. Hubert was soon utilized in the school, and presently, when the Brighton season was at its height, he was intrusted with a "ride"—a troop of joyous young ladies studying equitation, whom he escorted along the King's Road and sometimes as far as the Downs.

"Hubert Podifat?" answered the foreman of the yard when Mr. Tinson inquired for him. "He's out with a class—I expect for the last time."

"Why, how? or why do you expect that?" asked the lawyer eagerly, wondering how the news had travelled. "Has he said he was going to leave?"

"No fear. It's we are going to leave him. The governor's downright mad with him, and swears he'll give him the sack."

"What has he done?"

"Why what d'ye think, sir? This very morning he bucketed our brown mare along the Dyke Road forty miles an hour, riding a match with one of the pupils. The girl let out at dinner-time, and her father, old Fieldus the chemist, has been round to complain."

"Is the horse injured? We may make that up to you—"

"Tain't only that: that's the smallest part of it. They say—only I can't quite believe it—that the devil's imp has been making sheep's eyes at the girl; and what's more, that the girl don't half mind."

"Well, they're both young. It wasn't right, perhaps, but—"

"Right! Him to buckle up to Rebecca Fieldus! An only child. The old man's worth £40,000, they say, and it'll all come to her. D'ye suppose old Fieldus would suffer it, that he'd stand to a match between his daughter and one of our lads? 'Tain't natural. And look at the harm it'll do our business. We want our lads to keep themselves to themselves, to know their station and keep it, or who'd trust their girls to our rides."

"And you think Mr. Vasey will want to send Podifat away?"

"I'm sure of it. He's no great catch. A loose fish, I fancy; too fond of the west pier at nights, and in and out of the 'Magpie' bar all day. But there's the governor, and I think I hear the horses in the yard."

Mr. Vasey, a thick-set, red-faced, middle-aged man, with the air of a gentleman's coachman out of livery, had gone out to meet the returning ride. He stood in the centre of the yard with his legs wide apart, and fingering a stout hunting-crop in rather a menacing fashion.

"Here you, Podifat!" he cried out, and the lad having dismounted, approached rather defiantly, with less, as Mr. Tinson thought, of his customary slouch. "What's this about the brown mare? I'll teach you, you young cub—"

"Don't touch me," answered Hubert angrily, springing lightly back a step or two. "No one shall lay a hand on me. I'll do for you, or any one who dares strike me."

"Why, Podifat!" interposed Mr. Tinson, "keep your temper. This won't do."

"No, it won't do. I'm not the sort to be knocked about by them."

"You rascal, do you dare mutinize in my yard? You've bred mischief ever since you entered it, and now you've foundered one of my best horses and insulted one of my best customers," went on Mr. Vasey, very loud and blustering. "Get out, before I break this crop on your evil black-muzzled mug!"

"Don't fret yourself," said Hubert, now mocking and impudent.

"I'll go of my own accord. I've had enough of your dirty yard and filthy jobs. I'm a gentleman, as he knows," pointing to Mr. Tinson, "far too good for your blackguard business. Stand back! yah!"

Next minute he was in the street, closely followed by Mr. Tinson, who was not a little surprised and put out at what had occurred.

"You had better come as far as my hotel," said the lawyer. "I have a good deal to say to you, particularly after what I have just seen and heard."

"I am not going back there, not for nobody," Hubert said sulkily, interpreting Mr. Tinson's words his own way.

"That's as may be," replied Mr. Tinson, stiffly. "I don't quite see what's to be done with you. If you won't work ——"

"Why should I work?"

"What are you to live on if you don't?"

"On what's coming to me. I know."

This confirmed Mr. Tinson's first suspicions that Hubert somehow had gained an inkling of what might be in store for him.

"What do you know?"

"Never mind. Only I'm fly. I'm not to be humbugged. I know my rights."

"You know a great deal more than any one else does, then. You have no rights as yet ——"

It was no good beating about the bush. They were now seated in Mr. Tinson's room, Hubert at his own request, before a large tankard of "dog's nose," and the time for some sort of explanation had arrived.

"No rights; only expectations which may never be realized. Remember, there's many a slip."

"When will it be settled?"

"Not for months—a year. And then, perhaps, against you after all."

"I don't believe it. I'm bound to 'cop.' The chances are all on our side."

"I cannot imagine how you've heard that. Who's put such notions into your head? It's very wrong to mislead you; nothing is certain. On the contrary——"

Hubert looked dogged and unconvinced.

"Well, we won't waste time in arguing over probabilities. The

chief point is, what are you to do until we can see our way more clearly? I had hoped you would have stayed on here with Mr. Vasey, but I suppose that's out of the question now."

Hubert made no reply, but his set teeth and sullen look showed plainly what he thought.

"Where are you to go? How are we to—" keep you out of mischief? Mr. Tinson would have added, but forbore.

"I don't dislike this place. It's only Vasey. He's a mean hound."

"You ought really to be preparing yourself—" Mr. Tinson was musing as to the young man's possible future, but checked himself. "I mean that at your age a fellow should be trying to improve himself. Now tell me, what sort of education have you had?"

The question seemed to puzzle Hubert.

"Where were you at school?" asked Mr. Tinson, simplifying the question.

"Market Reepham; the Free School, for a short spell."

"How far did you go? Latin, Greek, the three R's?"

Hubert looked hopeless.

"Can you read?"

"A bit."

"And write?"

"On a slate."

"Anything else?"

"I was put into ciphering; but I played the truant and master whopped me, and then I ran away."

This was the presumptive heir to a baronetcy and twenty thousand a-year.

"It will never do. Whatever happens, whether you win the suit or you have to make your own living, you cannot be left in such hopeless ignorance. I must find some one who takes pupils of your sort, backward and neglected youths. I hope you'll agree to that, and make the most of your opportunities. It will be for your own good."

"Shall I have to leave Brighton? I don't mind a little schooling if I may stay here."

His affection for Brighton sounded suspicious. What was underneath? Mr. Tinson drew his own conclusions. This country-bred youth, with a natural bias towards vicious self-indulgence, had found some potent charms in the lower life of the gay seaside city, and was loath to surrender its pleasures.

Yet as well there as elsewhere. He was a scapegrace, a ne'er-do-well, as every one said, and, Mr. Tinson now knew for himself, one who would be certain to give trouble, to kick over the traces wherever he spent the next few months. Discipline would be wasted on him, but it might be possible to remove him some distance from temptation—and this the astute lawyer effected by placing him with a tutor at Patcham, a village two or three miles from the town.

Hubert fell in with this arrangement readily enough. But it was

not, as Mr. Tinson thought, the awakening of a better spirit, a commendable desire to make up for lost time, that induced Hubert at five-and-twenty to go back to school.

The fact was, Mr. Fieldus, the father of the lovely Rebecca, resided in a snug modern villa, surrounded by glass-houses and green lawns, at Preston Park, a short mile from Hubert's new home.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A BOLT FROM BRIGHTON.

THE result of the preliminary hearings had been decidedly unfavorable to the St. Evelyns, but the Colonel obstinately hoped on. The first actual shock came with the intimation that the Court intended to appoint a receiver for the Stradllethorpe property, and at last his confidence began to give way. This was a step seldom adopted in an ejectment case except when it was considered that the revenues were in the wrong hands.

The news fell rather heavily, too, upon Lady Lezaire. Although at the outset the prospect of dispossessing St. Evelyn had given her extreme pleasure, her satisfaction became more and more alloyed as she realized all that the transfer of the property meant to her. If only it could be shown that the first wife had died before Sir Percy's second marriage! This would make all the difference to the survivor. She would still be entitled to call herself Lady Lezaire.

But this was a point on which Sir Percy's confession left little doubt. The date of Priscilla's death was distinctly stated, but there was no official proof of it. Satisfactory evidence on this head was earnestly sought in the inquiry made by Mr. Tinson's agent, but no proof of it could be found.

Lady Lezaire was thus indirectly a party to the suit, and very closely concerned in it. She continually questioned Mr. Tinson as to what might befall her.

"I suppose it is certain that the woman is dead?" she asked doubtfully, the day that she heard of the appointment of the receiver.

"We have no certificate, and until death is proved the law presumes the person is still alive. Now the effect of showing that Priscilla Lady Lezaire is alive now, would be to establish the fact that she was alive when you married Sir Percy. Hence that marriage was illegal."

"And I have no right to call myself Lady Lezaire?"

"Precisely, except by courtesy. But under the circumstances who would be so brutal as to deny you the title?"

Lady Lezaire shook her head sadly.

"It is very painful to me—it is another cross to bear; it is all very, very hard."

"But at any rate your position from a monetary point of view will not be affected. We have taken the best advice, and counsel are all unanimous that your settlements will hold. Sir Percy made them in good faith, out of personality which he was free to dispose of as he pleased. They took the nature of a deed of gift."

"And my jointure—is that safe too?"

"Well, that is more doubtful. You see it was secured on the entailed property, and can only hold if the new heir accepts the lien. He should do so, by every principle of justice, and he shall, if I have any influence over him."

"I should be sorry to be beholden to him, but I really look upon this as my right."

"You are fairly entitled to do so. That is the view Sir Hubert will take, if he has any proper feeling," said Mr. Tinson, with a confidence he scarcely felt. What he had seen of the new baronet did not encourage high hopes of the generosity of his principles, or the nice feeling he was likely to show.

"And Rachel's portion—will she keep that?"

"The cases are not dissimilar. Hers depends, like yours, on the production of proof of Priscilla's death. Failing that, she must be accounted illegitimate, and could inherit only the moneys specially bequeathed to her. She could not touch a penny of the rent-charge left her for life upon the entailed property. But she is far worse off than you, because she has to defend the suit."

"That will affect them, then?" asked Lady Lezaire, with a satisfaction she did not care to conceal.

"Undoubtedly, unless costs are given by the judge against the estate. If the St. Evelyns lose, it is pretty probable that they will have to stand the shot."

"What are the costs likely to amount to?"

"There is no saying. £20,000 won't pay them. And then there are back rents, the sums wrongfully received up to the present date—quite half a year's income. It will take all they have, and something more."

"They will be ruined!" cried Lady Lezaire, almost gleefully.

"It will go very hard with them. The Colonel has nothing, I believe."

"Not a sixpence—never had."

"What will become of them? Upon my soul, it seems hard."

"Mr. Tinson, how can you say such a thing? and after his—his— You know. I can't bear to speak of it. Surely no punishment that overtakes him in this world can be too severe. Let him starve; he will deserve it."

"But Mrs. St. Evelyn, Lady Lezaire, and the innocent children—shall they suffer for their father's sin?"

"She made her bed, let her lie on it. I shall do nothing for them. They need not expect it."

A talk having much the same tenor took place between St. Evelyn and his legal advisers. As the day of the great trial approached,

the St. Evelyns' chances seemed to dwindle away. The case grew stronger and stronger against them. An independent enquiry instituted by Mr. Davis only satisfied him of the overwhelming strength of the claimant's case. Once more Mr. Davis counselled compromise, but it was now too late. Nothing but unconditional surrender would be accepted by the other side.

"All or nothing, that's our answer," said Mr. Tinson triumphantly, when overtures were made.

The case was down for hearing in the early spring, little more than a twelvemonth from poor Carysfort's death. It was likely to be soon decided, for the evidence was short and to the point.

"It all lies in a nutshell," said Mr. Tinson. "I really think we are bound to win. I wish I was as sure of keeping the new baronet straight until his succession, when I shall wash my hands of him."

The reports received from Patcham were by no means encouraging. Hubert's tutor could do nothing with him.

"He won't learn," wrote this gentleman, a Mr. Partridge, who was a kind of army coach, and had one or two other pupils, "and leads the other lads astray. It is more obstinacy and wrong-headedness than stupidity. The young man may not be quick-witted, but he is no fool. Only, he loathes books and everything connected with them. I may possibly enable him to sign his own name, but not certainly the same way twice. If I might venture so far as to suggest it, I think it would be wise to limit him as regards funds."

Mr. Tinson, feeling that some day Hubert might have the command of a princely income, did not feel justified in altogether withholding supplies, and he had been making the young man an allowance of a couple of pounds a week.

"The money all goes the same way—with low company, in the gratification of low tastes. It is with the greatest difficulty that I keep him to regular hours. He is for ever wandering into Brighton or elsewhere, returning sometimes quite late at night. On one occasion a mob of disreputable friends brought him home flushed with drink, and in altogether a most discreditable condition.

"Several times I have thought that in justice to my other pupils I ought to beg of you to remove him from my house."

But Mr. Partridge was a poor man, to whom a pupil more or less mattered greatly, and he continued to tolerate Hubert's presence till a more serious scandal compelled him to telegraph to Mr. Tinson—

"Pray come down. Great trouble. Podifat in custody."

The moment was ill chosen for any escapade. The case of Lezaire v. St. Evelyn was to begin this week, and the appearance of the claimant in court was indispensable.

"What has he been doing?" asked Mr. Tinson sharply of his tutor. "I am afraid you have allowed him too much licence."

"He has been a cause of infinite trouble to us," pleaded Mr. Partridge. "I am quite sorry we kept him."

"So am I. He was too much for you. But now, what's the matter now? where is he? In custody? Where? On what charge?"

"At Newhaven. The charge is abduction. He has run off with the only daughter of a highly respected——"

"Chemist, named Fieldus. Isn't that it?"

It was the sad fact. Hubert's numerous absences from Patcham were thus explained. He had been carrying on an insidious intrigue with the gentle but too trusting Rebecca. What wiles he used were never fully laid bare; but it was ascertained that for conquest he had not depended on his dark face alone. He had posed as the exiled nobleman who must shortly recover his own. His mysterious hints of what was coming to him—a title and great fortune, in both of which she should share—sufficed to win the silly girl's favor. Miss Fieldus had but lately left a boarding-school, and was still wrapt in romantic dreams. Hubert was the prince promised her by sycophantic schoolfellows, who toadied and worshipped the young heiress.

Oswego Villa, where Mr. Fieldus resided, stood detached: in front, a long lawn reached the highroad—behind, another, with thick shrubbery, ran parallel with the railway embankment. Hubert came along the line to the trysting-place, slid down the embankment, and made his way to his lady-love through a thick-set hedge. Their meetings were conducted with great secrecy. Old Fieldus was away at his business all day, and the servants were suborned to silence by the artful Rebecca.

A crisis came when the chemist ran up against Hubert near the house, recognized him, and angrily warned him that if he showed himself there again he should be handed over to the stablemen and thrashed within an inch of his life.

The course of true love was thus rudely ruffled. Hubert told Rebecca that he was watched and did not dare see her again.

Why would she not go off with him?

Next day, with fifty pounds in his pocket which he had raised from a Brighton Jew on his expectations, and a bill for three times the amount, Hubert was whirling along the Newhaven road, Rebecca at his side, in a mail phaeton and pair. They meant to catch the Dieppe steamer and go on at once to Paris. Rebecca had travelled this way before, with her father.

But the runaways had been betrayed by the livery-stable keeper, who had suspected Hubert from the first and consulted Mr. Vasey. Old Fieldus followed, furious, to Newhaven, having first put the police on the alert, and the lovers were detained. The father recovered his daughter, and Hubert was sent to the lockup, with three serious charges against him, all started by the implacable Mr. Fieldus; first, the abduction of a minor; next, obtaining money (from the Jew) under false pretences; and last, the attempted theft of a mail phaeton and pair.

This was the mess Mr. Tinson had to clear up. And he did it,

but only by much astute argument, and a lavish expenditure of cash. The money-lender kindly accepted cent. per cent. for his advance; the job master could not substantiate theft when his property was restored to him with a handsome douceur; but old Fieldus was more obdurate.

"He shall go to jail. I want to see him on the treadmill, or picking oakum. I'd like to see him hanged."

"Of course he richly deserves punishment," Mr. Tinson admitted. "But just think, the innocent will suffer with the guilty. If you proceed against him, your daughter's name must be dragged into court. Now, wouldn't it be better to avoid the—ahem!—scandal, eh?"

Mr. Fieldus was very loath to let go his revenge, yet he saw the full force of what Mr. Tinson said.

"Poor child! she'll never hold her head up again, I'm afraid. He hadn't ought to be let off, the double-dyed young scoundrel; but for her sake—I suppose I must give way."

"He ought to make her amends, Mr. Fieldus. He has promised to marry her, you know, and he shall do so, if you wish and approve."

"Never! What! give my Rebecca to that scamp? Let all my money go to a sot and a scapegrace who'd squander it and ill-use her? No, no. He's no mate for my girl. How she will weather this, God knows; but to marry that blackguard would be too heavy a penalty to pay."

"I don't defend him; I should be sorry indeed to recommend him. He is by no means a perfect character—that I readily admit. But under the circumstances—you may have heard, perhaps?—he would be no unequal match."

Mr. Fieldus was better read in the pharmacopœia and preparation of drugs than in the proceedings of the law courts, and he had evidently heard nothing of the great case pending.

"I know of no circumstances—none at present, I mean"—he said, "that could reconcile me to accept him as a son-in-law—a low-born scamp, a mere adventurer—"

"There you are mistaken, Mr. Fieldus. I may tell you——"

Mr. Tinson paused. Why should he tell Mr. Fieldus of Hubert's chances? They were good enough, but they might go against him after all. If Mr. Fieldus would not take him, there was an end of the matter. It was enough to get the young man out of the scrape, and this Mr. Tinson secured.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"LE ROI EST MORT."

Vive le roi!

Le roi est mort. Vive le roi!

The great Lezaire case was ended, and the new baronet, Sir Hubert Lezaire reigned supreme.

It had never been in much doubt, said those learned in the law. The only hitch, the disappearance of Priscilla Lady Lezaire, *née* Spary, and the absence of proof of her death, did not affect the heirship. It only left Rachel's right to her inheritance in doubt. This point was reserved, but eventually settled by a compromise.

Mrs. St. Evelyn might enjoy all she inherited undisturbed, provided her attorneys gave an undertaking not to appeal. The Colonel was persuaded, with some difficulty, to consent to this. His wife kept her portion, or the remnant that survived the lawyers' claims —a mere pittance. The St. Evelyns were practically beggared.

Let us leave them for the present to recommence life in poverty and discomfort, and follow the fortunes of the new owner Straddel-thorpe Hall.

What will he do? How will he behave? These were the questions asked on all sides and by all manner of people in Thorpe-shire.

Nowhere was the new owner of Straddel-thorpe canvassed more eagerly and with more misgiving than at the Hall itself. Servants and employees of all grades, almost without exception, were very anxious as to the future.

They knew Sir Hubert so well, all of them; and he knew them. What kind of master was this jumped-up youngster likely to make? —this fortunate youth who till yesterday had been one of themselves, lower than many, superior to none; browbeaten, knocked about, abused, often cuffed, and very generally despised?

Many said, especially among the upper servants, that they'd better give notice and clear out.

"I shan't want to be kicked out," said honest Tom Staines, the head-keeper. "We've had too many cross words, him and I, for us to forgather and be good friends. I know he hates me, and I've never had no respect for him. I'd rather go under-keeper for a bit than stay here and knuckle down to him."

"That's my view," observed Mr. Thorndike, the bailiff. "I've been on the estate, man and boy, these five-and-forty years, and know every stick, every stone. I shall be heartsore at leaving the land, but I must go. I could have stomached the Colonel. For all he's so arbitrary, he's a gentleman, and acted fair. But I couldn't give this chap willing honest service, knowing what he's been, and all I've said of him, and all I feel."

"I suppose Sir Hubert's money'll be as good as another man's," said leery old Peters, who scented good times coming for those who knew how to turn them to account.

"Do you mean to stay, Mr. Peters?"

"It'll all depend on how he shapes and who he puts over us. If you ask me, I say I'd far rather stay. It's ill changing roofs at my time of life, and to my thinking Sir Hubert's better than that murthering Colonel. What have we got to do with what he was? It's

what he is and means to be. I'm ready to serve him faithfully if he'll let me, and 'll treat me fair. He's had a slice of luck—well, I don't grudge it him."

"But you'd like to stand in and share? That's about the size of it," cried Tom Staines. "A stable full of nags, the buying and swopping all in your own hands, to say nothing of the corn and the hay."

"I likes my regulars, Mr Staines, and so do you. Do you never sell pheasants' eggs or take tips for placing the guns? But if you wish to say that I'm not straight and above-board, why, you'll have to stand to it. I'm no worse than my neighbors."

"I never defrauded my master of a mag," retorted Staines, angrily.
"If you weren't an older man——"

"There, there," interposed Mr. Thorndike. "No quarrelling among old friends, and before ladies too. Here comes Mrs. Leleu."

The housekeeper, in her quiet black dress, with her dark inscrutable face, was seen crossing the yard to the harness-room, where the foregoing conversation had taken place.

"Morning, ma'am," said Staines. "Any news? We're talking of what's likely to happen. Shall you stay on?"

"What do you intend to do, Mr. Staines?" replied Mrs. Leleu evading the question adroitly, but it was plain she resented it and did not choose to answer.

"We mean to go, Mr. Thorndike and I, before we're turned out. Now Mr Peters here——"

"No one need be turned out, I'm sure, unless he wishes it," replied Mrs. Leleu, with an air of patronage. She was evidently more behind the scenes than her fellow-servants. "Sir Hubert has no present desire to make any change in the establishment."

"Have you heard that for certain?" asked Mr. Thorndike.

"Yes, this morning, from Mr. Tinson. That was what brought me here. Peters, you are to meet the 3.05 express. Sir Hubert will arrive this afternoon."

"What carriage?"

"Mr. Tinson did not say. You will know best."

It was now full summer-tide, and the old coachman, mindful of the importance of the occasion, took over the open barouche, a state vehicle of ancient but imposing appearance, with a great yellow body swinging between high curved springs. Both Peters and the footman beside him were in their best liveries, and even the groom with the luggage-cart wore the bottle-green coat with orange cuffs of the retainers of the Lezaires.

Sir Hubert came tumbling down the side steps of the station as fast as he could run, and made straight for the carriage.

"Holloa! what's this?" he cried, evidently disgusted and disappointed. "I expected the mail phaeton."

"Nothing special was ordered, Sir Hubert," said Peters, promptly and most deferentially, as he made the usual salute.

"It's that ass Tinson. And I was dying to finger the ribbons. Here, Tinson, I say, they've brought the barouche, and I particularly wanted to drive myself. Why didn't you see to it?"

"Why didn't you see to it yourself?" replied the lawyer with quick resentment. "You're your own master, and can give your own orders now."

"But you haven't let me. You are always interfering. I'll be blowed if I—"

"Be quiet, can't you?" whispered the lawyer, nearly exasperated. "Before your new servants too! Jump in; we can settle all this at Straddlethorpe before I take my leave."

The role of bear-leader was clearly displeasing to Mr. Tinson, and he did not mean to play it long.

"Jump in? Not I! I shall get on the box. I mean to try the paces of these bays. Peters never would let me drive them in old times, but he can't help himself now."

"And what's to become of Peters himself, and the footman?"

"They shall go inside."

"With me? Thank you."

"No; you can get up on the box. I'll take care of you."

This was how Sir Hubert Lezaire started to take possession of his ancestral home. There was a general but suppressed laughter at the little station as the barouche disappeared, driven at a break-neck pace by its owner, while his men sat up as solemn and unconcerned as they could manage upon the seats of honor inside.

The journey to Straddlethorpe was a short five miles, but fate ruled that many persons should witness this madcap escapade. The galloping horses, flogged to their utmost speed, got out of hand and first narrowly overturned a pony-carriage, then cannoned against a market cart, and meeting last of all the humble waggonette of a country parson, so terrified its driver that he turned sharp off the road and was upset into a ditch.

The manner of Sir Hubert's entry into Straddlethorpe was the common talk of the whole county before the week was out.

"Not so bad," cried the new baronet, consulting his watch, a brand-new gold repeater, as the steaming horses were reined in with difficulty at the hall door. "Twenty-nine minutes the five miles. What's amiss, you old fool?"

This was to Peters, who had alighted at once, and was already examining his cattle, the most cherished pair of horses in his stable.

"Too fast, too fast, Sir Hubert. They're not in Derby condition."

"Well, they ought to be, if they're to drag me behind 'em. But two won't do, I want a team. You must look out for 'em: four of a color, a level lot that'll do credit to a coach by Marlitt & Tunks."

He rattled on nineteen to the dozen, to Mr. Tinson's manifest annoyance, while Peter's stood listening respectfully and the footman held the hall door open wide.

There was some one waiting within who was moved seemingly to great wrath by what she heard and saw.

"Scatterbrain! Addle-pate! Senseless idiot! to make such a beginning."

It was Mrs. Leleu: her black eyes flashing indignation, and her pale dark face fierce and forbidding.

But when the baronet passed under his own rooftree, she had schooled herself to look pleasant, and greeted him quite smiling, with the smirking self-satisfaction of an old and privileged attendant.

"My humble duty to you, Sir Hubert Lezaire; a warm welcome and hearty good wishes! May you long live to enjoy your good fortune, now you've come to your own!"

"What! Mother Leleu herself! I had clean forgotten. How goes it? I'm glad to see you so blooming. But I say, none of your jawbations now. Things is altered. But come along, let's refresh."

"Tea is laid in the china drawing-room," said Mrs. Leleu rather primly.

"Tea! Hog's wash! dish-water! No catlap for me. Send in the decanters. I'm for port wine and potash. What'll you try, Tinson?"

And Sir Hubert passed on, still holding the carriage-whip, and without removing his hat, to the drawing-room called the "china-room," from the numerous cabinets it contained, all crammed with costly Sèvres, Dresden, and old blue. There he sprawled full length upon a settee covered with fine satin brocade, drank three glasses of port running, and lit an enormous ciga.:

"Why do you let him go on like that?" hissed Mrs. Leleu in Mr. Tinson's ear. "It's bestial. He'll be ruined, lost, within the year."

"I'm not his keeper or his bear-leader, the Lord be praised!" responded the lawyer, quite piously. "If you're so concerned for his welfare you'd better take him in hand. I've other and more pressing occupations. I said I'd start him fair, so I came down, but I don't care how soon I go back again. In spite of the good business he brings, I think I've had nearly enough of Sir Hubert Lezaire."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE STRADDLETHORPE STAKES.

THERE was a magistrates' meeting a few days later in Market Reepham, and much county business to transact; so the Thorpeshire Club was very full about lunch-time. It was a sociable little place, where every one knew every one else, and at the long table where all sat together the talk was general and well sustained.

It was all on one topic; the new owner of Straddlethorpe, his

strange advent, and the way he would "shape" as a neighbor and personage in the shire.

"It was tremendous the way he drove home," said Lord Prudhames. "He was like Mazeppa urging on his wild career. Gibson, our parson, met him and fairly turned tail."

"Fancy driving one's own barouche and the coachman inside!" said another.

"I don't so much quarrel about that," said sensible old Etherly of Etherly. "It's a distinction only. Any man might drive a coach and put his own people inside. Besides, I daresay he's fond of driving, and no doubt hasn't had much of it."

"Put a beggar on horse-flesh and he'll drive to the devil," added Mr. Newall, who went in for epigram.

"That's where he'll go, hands down, in less than no time, I'm afraid. Make ducks and drakes of everything."

"What a Nemesis for Sir Percy! A fine property nursed for years just for this spendthrift to squander it."

"He'll never do, I'm afraid. There's no quality about him. He may have the blood, but he's missed the breeding, and it's too late to get that now."

"He ought never to have been lifted out of the mud. It's monstrous hard on the St. Evelyns," said Mr. Etherly, who was still staunch to his old friend.

"I really cannot see that." The speaker was General Wyndham-Parker. "St. Evelyn married for money——"

"Come, come. At any rate Rachel did not."

"For money which slipped through his fingers. He was after Straddluthorpe, and made no bones about the means of acquiring it."

"Oh, I say! When thirteen jurymen and a judge tried and acquitted him, would you call him guilty still?"

"I shall always have my own opinions, and I'm delighted the property's come to the right man. I don't believe he's half a bad chap, this Hubert Lezaire."

"Will he do his duty by the county? Will he keep up his coverts, breed foxes, and subscribe to the hunt?"

"He has sent a first cheque of a hundred towards the new kennels," cried the General. "He told me so himself yesterday."

"Oh, you have seen him, then. Where?"

"At his own place. I called at Straddluthorpe."

He might have added, but did not, that Sir Hubert had returned the visit already—in fact the same day.

"I suppose we must all call," said Lord Prudhames, to turn off the smile which lighted his as well as most faces at the table.

Mrs. Wyndham-Parker had still three marriageable daughters, and Straddluthorpe was now in the market.

"Well, I went because I had to go," said the General, seemingly unconscious. "I had to speak about that slip of gorse that borders my spinney."

"And how did you find him, General?"

"Very shy."

"That was probably sherry."

"I certainly saw no signs of that. He was diffident, as might be expected, but by no means *gauche*. I feel confident that, with kindly encouragement, he would soon improve."

"If he could only marry, well and soon," said Mr. Etherly, maliciously.

"It would be the best thing for him," replied the General, stoutly refusing to understand the allusion.

"Undoubtedly," all agreed. "If any sensible girl could be found to manage his establishment for him—it'll soon want it, I expect—and take him himself in hand."

"Ay, ay! but where is she to be found?" asked Mr. Etherly, abstractedly. "I don't envy any girl the job. To my thinking, she'd have a rough time. Where is she to be found, eh?"

It was an open question which no one felt constrained to answer, although one person present was ready to do so. General and Mrs. Wyndham-Parker thought they knew of the very wife to suit Sir Hubert Lezaire.

They had six daughters in all. One only had married as yet: Mrs. Richards, the wife of the old aide-de camp who had been a candidate for the county jail. Then came three, familiarly known as 'Ica,' 'Ina,' 'Etta,' the pet abbreviations of the long winded names, Frederica, Georniara, and Henrietta. Two more, 'Ita' and 'Otta,' were still in the schoolroom.

Although making a fair show at Hazelgrove—a house long empty and rented low—money was not too plentiful with the Wyndham-Parkers, and the prudent parents were most anxious to get their daughters comfortably settled.

Yet the three now on hand hung fire, and within a year or two there would be five. Ita and Otta were fast growing into womanhood.

Etta, it was true, had made a conquest at Plymouth when staying with her married sister, whose husband was now an army paymaster. But it was no great catch—a captain in a marching regiment with no expectations—and two old soldiers like General and Mrs. Wyndham-Parker knew to a penny the exact value of such a military marriage.

Etta was attractive, more so than her elder sisters: there were people, indeed, who called her remarkably pretty. Her father and mother both thought she might do better for herself than with this Captain Sutton. Still they did not quite refuse their consent. After all, a bird in the hand—

Not a little of the General's objection to Etta's engagement with Captain Sutton was due to its irregularity. As an officer of the old school, he was a great stickler for seniority. Age before honesty: the first-born had the first claims. Etta might marry Captain Sutton or almost any one, when she pleased, provided Ica and Ina were disposed of and out of the way.

Hence in the campaign against Straddlethorpe—and the plan of operations had been fully discussed and settled directly Sir Hubert had gained his suit—it was resolved to push Ica, the eldest, well to the front.

Frederica Wyndham-Parker thoroughly understood what was expected of her. She was ready to go forward to the attack like a true veteran, grateful for the chances of distinction accorded her.

She was with her father on his first visit to Straddlethorpe. They rode over. Ica looked well on horseback : a habit suited her thin figure, and her plain swarthy face looked less uninteresting under the tall black hat.

Sir Hubert came out to the doorstep, and insisted rather boisterously—the General had described him as shy!—on their entering the house.

"I want to talk business for just two minutes, Lezaire," began the General.

"You must come in, sir—come in and take something. Too early? Stuff! it's past twelve. And the young lady: she must want refreshment after her ride."

"No, no," protested the General, as he explained. "It's about that bit of gorse. Now your new man Woodley—an honest chap enough, I daresay—and I don't agree."

Sir Hubert did not listen. He was already helping Miss Wyndham-Parker to dismount, clumsily enough, but with great goodwill. Somehow an arm slipped round the slender waist, and Ica felt a very distinct squeeze of her hand. The young baronet knew only one way of making himself agreeable to the fair sex.

The rare blushes were still mantling on Ica's sallow cheeks when Sir Hubert, finding his hospitable offers refused, insisted upon showing them over the Hall. The invitation seemed to confirm a vague hope that she had made an impression, and she forgave him the forwardness that was a silent but expressive tribute to her charms.

They visited all the principal rooms, and duly admired all; the china drawing-room, my lady's boudoir, a charming chamber looking out on a little rose-garden of its own, specially appropriated to the mistress of Straddlethorpe, and long occupied by the last Lady Lezaire.

As Isa looked round she saw herself with prophetic eye already installed, and her hopes ran higher when Sir Hubert stepped out into the garden and gathered her a choice bouquet.

But the business talk had rather suffered; the General had not again referred to what seemed a mere subterfuge for calling. It was the young baronet who returned to the subject.

"What about the gorse, General? Shall I send for Woodley?"

"Why not have a horse round and ride there? You could come on and lunch at Hazelgrove."

"Right you are. I'm your man. It won't take me five minutes to order a horse."

Sir Hubert was ready himself to jump into the saddle. His favorite costume was horsey ; he lived in breeches and gaiters, and looked at his best like a horse-dealer's tout or under stud-groom.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SIR HUBERT'S FRIENDS.

WHEN the horses were brought round to the door, Sir Hubert helped Miss Wyndham-Parker to remount in approved fashion, lifting her after he had taken her tiny foot in his hand, then placing it in the stirrup and carefully arranging the folds of the habit.

" You're like a feather," he cried. " I should think you could ride six stone four. And a first-rate jockey too," he added admiringly, as he saw her sitting up straight and self-possessed.

" Ica can ride a bit," said her father. " All my girls can. I taught them myself."

The little General was very proud of his own horsemanship.

" Shall we take a spin round the park, sir ? We can get out at the far end ; that is, if you are not afraid, miss, of a bit of jumping."

Ica for answer gave her horse his head, and the three cantered gaily on across the level turf, affrighting the few timid deer that still made the park their home, and pointing with increasing pace for the low fence, beyond which was a grassy lane-like road that led to the home farm.

" Bravo !" cried Sir Hubert, as Ica sailed first over the fence, he following close in her wake. " You took that like a bird. Come on ! let's have a racket across the fields."

" Hold hard !" shouted the General. " You'll ruin your hay crop, and there's young corn beyond."

" Bother the crops !" answered Sir Hubert, as he reluctantly reined in. " Never mind, Miss Ica, we'll have our gallop out yet. Wait till the cub-hunting comes. I should like to pilot you across country : you're one of the right sort, and you shall ride my chestnut mare."

Ica was radiant when she reached Hazelgrove ; her eyes sparkled with satisfaction. It was with quite an air of ownership that she presented Sir Hubert to her mother.

" Sir Hubert Lezaire, mamma ; he has come to lunch. Papa brought him with us. And we have had such a delightful ride !"

" It is very good of you, Sir Hubert, to join our family party," said Mrs. Wyndham-Parker, a large fair woman with the remains of great good looks, but rather anxious pale eyes and worn washed-out complexion, that spoke of family cares. Poor mother ! she had a large brood—disappointing daughters that would not go off, an expensive household, and not too ample means. Life had not been

easy with Mrs. Parker ; hers had been a wandering nomad existence, from garrison to garrison, all over the world, always campaigning and struggling, till they had settled down at Hazelgrove, where other troubles, these disappointing daughters, constantly vexed and preoccupied her.

"Well, girls," said the General, bustling in. "How are you, Maria? Hope you have a good lunch for us. But I told Sir Hubert he must take what he could find."

The luncheon party had been planned, like everything else, and was something more than the ordinary square, substantial, mid-day meal that generally made a pretentious late dinner unnecessary at Hazelgrove.

The guest's place had also been carefully settled beforehand. He sat between Mrs. Wyndham-Parker and the daughter they intended for him, Ica, who, still flushed and excited with her ride, retailed its chief incidents with much animation.

"Where's Etta?" asked the General, crossly. His military training had schooled him to the most exact punctuality, and he expected it from every one in the house. "She must have heard the bell. Besides, it's long past two."

"Shall I go and call her, father?" asked one of the younger children.

"Certainly not. If she likes to lose her lunch, that's her affair."

But at that moment the door opened, and Miss Etta, slow, self-possessed, and unconcerned, walked in.

"Late for parade, miss," began the General, sharply. "You know the rule: dry bread and cheese——" He stopped abruptly, checked by a scowl from his better half. These details of a strict domestic discipline were hardly calculated to impress their guest.

"I could not come sooner. I was finishing a letter to Sam," said Miss Etta, coolly.

Now Sam was the Captain Sutton to whom she was supposed to have engaged herself altogether without her parents' consent, and this reckless remark was like a challenge flung down for her father's acceptance. Under other circumstances a sharp passage of arms would undoubtedly have ensued.

"Is that another of your girls?" quickly asked Sir Hubert, who had been staring hard at Etta ever since she entered the room.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Parker, indifferently. "My third daughter, Etta. You were saying, Ica——"

"Sir Hubert has offered to give me a mount for the cub-hunting —his chestnut mare."

"I seldom let my daughters follow the hounds, Sir Hubert. And she has her own saddle-horse, a very good one, I think."

"Eh? Oh yes, I beg your pardon, a regular stunner," answered Sir Hubert absently, and thinking only of the beautiful girl at the other end of the table who still absorbed all his attention.

Etta Parker took after her mother, and was the only one of the

six daughters who favored her. She was tall and statuesque, with a dazzlingly fair complexion and abundant auburn hair. A low forehead, dark-blue eyes, strictly regular features, a small but firm mouth, were not the least of her charms.

For the remainder of the lunch Sir Hubert continued silent; he spoke very little, and only in answer to questions addressed directly to him. Mrs. Wyndham-Parker found him very heavy on her hands, whilst to poor Ica's blandishments he was altogether callous and indifferent. Eyes and ears were only for Etta. He was always looking at her, now furtively, now openly, always listening for the sound of her voice. Strange to say, and quite contrary to his usual custom, he drank very little wine at lunch. But when the ladies rose and left the room, he gulped down a great bumper of sherry, as though to drown his despair.

The General pretended not see the perfectly obvious impression that Etta had made. Sir Hubert had taken a fancy to the wrong one, and it was repugnant to the General's peculiar notions to acknowledge or approve the choice.

But before the day was out it became plain that he must part with his pet prejudices or lose an eligible son-in-law. Sir Hubert's attentions to the most attractive daughter of the house—Etta was quite the flower of the flock—were marked and unmistakable.

It was a delightful summer's day, just warm enough to make the open air pleasanter than the house; and when the General offered a cigar on the lawn, they found the whole family picturesquely grouped on garden-chairs and bright-colored rugs under the shade of a great horse-chesnut tree. Of course the lawn tennis net was stretched, and the courts marked out invitingly.

"You're not going to run away yet, I hope, Sir Hubert?" said Mrs. Wyndham-Parker, hospitably. "Won't you join the girls in a game?"

"I'm afraid I know much of a player. In fact, I hardly know the game," said Sir Hubert, sheepishly.

"One of them will teach you," said the mother.

"Will you?" abruptly asked Sir Hubert of Etta, who stood close by, racquet in hand. Ica, poor child, had lost her chance. She could not play lawn tennis in a riding-habit, and had gone to change.

"Oh yes," replied Etta, not very warmly; "but I'm not much of a hand at it myself."

"You will wait for Ica?" interposed the mother, aather anxiously.

But the remark was lost upon the others, who had already moved towards the lawn tennis ground. Etta, a true daughter of Eve, enjoyed admiration, and was perhaps not ill-pleased to cut her elder sister out. When Ica returned, poor thing, Sir Hubert never looked at her. He was too much absorbed in his game, too attentive to the sweet voice of his instructress, too much fascinated with her shapely figure as she flew to and fro about the lawn.

"I call it the most barefaced poaching," Ica said, with tears in

her eyes. "It's far too bad of Etta; Captain Sutton ought to know. Why isn't she satisfied with one, the disgraceful flirt?"

"I really don't think she is encouraging him," protested Mrs. Parker. "It is all on his side."

Ica looked at her mother reproachfully; there was no consolation in the remark.

Discord had entered the Wyndham-Parker family with Sir Hubert Lezaire. There was ill blood between the sisters, and the old people were in a dilemma.

"My dear, it is most unfortunate," said the General to his wife when Sir Hubert had gone. "I am monstrously annoyed, and hardly know what to do. We had better get Etta out of the way."

"Where is she to go? Not back to Plymouth. Captain Sutton, you know, is still there."

"Hang the fellow! yes. I don't want another pauper in the family. Richards is bad enough."

"Well, but, Wilfrid, why should we do anything? Why not let things take their course."

"Maria, Ica is the oldest: it is her turn first."

"I know that. But still it seems such a pity to let the chance slip. I feel sure he is smitten with Etta, and it would be such a very easy way out of the Sutton entanglement. Sir Hubert would be such a much better match."

"It's against my principles," said the General. "At any rate, we won't give way yet. We may be all wrong; it may be only fancy about Etta."

"There can be no question of his admiration. The only doubt is how she will accept it."

"I thought she seemed pleased with his attentions."

"On the surface, yes. But that is because she is cutting out and carrying off another girl's prize. I'm not so sure she would take him even if he offered."

"You do not think Etta would be so mad as to refuse Sir Hubert and £20,000 a-year?"

"She won't give up Captain Sutton very easily, whatever the temptation. Money is not everything with young girls, and in personal advantages Captain Sutton has, I expect, far the best of it."

"You mustn't let her be such a fool. I look to you, Maria, to warn her, to put her best interests plainly before her."

"Then you don't object to her having the precedence of her elder sister?"

"I don't think we ought to let Straddlethorpe go out of the family," the General replied.

There was an angry discussion between the two sisters in the privacy of their own bedroom that night.

"I couldn't help it," protested Etta. "He came after me of his own accord."

"You should have snubbed him. What would Captain Sutton

say? I am quite sorry for him, poor fellow," retorted Ica, too proud to lay any stress on her own wrongs.

"Sam can take care of himself. We quite understand each other. Our engagement is sure to be a long one, and we have agreed that we are both to enjoy ourselves."

"Then you did enjoy it to-day. I was sure of it."

"I didn't. I don't care that for Sir Hubert Lezaire. You are welcome to him, if you can get him. I think him an ugly, ill-bred, forward little cad."

"I'd like to tell him what you say."

"Do so. He won't thank you or believe you, and will come after me all the same."

"Yes, and you would take him in the end, in spite of all you say now. Henrietta, you're an untruthful, deceitful, dishonorable, wicked girl."

"That's mere jealousy and disappointment."

"I don't want him either."

"Grapes are sour, my dear."

"But I am sorry for Sam."

"Leave Sam alone, Frederica," cried Etta, blazing out, as such quiet equable tempers sometimes will. "That's the second time you've pitied him, and he don't want it, dear honest old Sam."

And suddenly changing in tone, she took out a photograph which was carefully kept under lock and key, and kissed it again and again.

"And that's the man you're going to throw over!"

"I'm not. How dare you say such a thing?"

"You let another man make love to you."

"That's a wicked untruth. And if I did! Oh, Sam, you old dear, why are you so far away?"

Fickle, flighty, inscrutable young person! Made seemingly to be the torment of both sexes; give one the heartache, and fill the other with envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness.

CHAPTER XL.

A ROW WITH MRS. LELEU.

A very close intimacy now sprang up between Straddlethorpe and Hazelgrove. Both sides labored hard to foster it. Messages came and went; little attentions were constantly exchanged. The Hall sent fruit and flowers, fine peaches and choice exotics, from its acres of glass; the Grove returned the compliment, with pressing invitations to go over to lunch and lawn tennis, often to dine and spend the night.

Sir Hubert was always on his best behavior, although his manners continued uncouth; he was so evidently anxious to appear to ad-

vantage before Etta, whom he singled out more and more from her sisters and worshipped openly, but in a shy calf-like fashion, very different from his usual bold and boisterous wooings.

He made very little progress with her, however. As a rule, Etta avoided him, and where this was impossible, she seldom threw him a civil word. Only now and again, when the spirit of mischief was uppermost, just to tease her sister or test her influence, she would drop her eyes coquettishly when he spoke to her, and softly lower her voice in reply. While Hubert's passionate nature was thus maddened with delusive hope, poor Ica would cry with vexation, and vow that Captain Sutton should be told what was going on.

The acquaintance was some weeks old before the ladies from Hazelgrove accepted the hospitalities of the Hall. The General had been there frequently, but that did not matter. It was different for Mrs. Wyndham-Parker and the girls, whose visit to a bachelor establishment would have looked rather marked, and added greatly to the malicious gossip already afloat.

But Sir Hubert's growing more and more pressing, would take no denial. They must come over, all of them, to lunch and spend the day. Why not stay over the day? His new coach had come down; he would drive them back—with Etta on the box-seat, if she would accept it—and they could help him to decide about the new team he was trying.

He gave due notice—a little too timidly, perhaps—to Mrs. Leleu.

"I am expecting a large party the day after to-morrow, and shall want six bedrooms—the best—and that Spanish room, you know."

"Who's coming?" asked the housekeeper abruptly. They were alone, and her manner was scarcely respectful. It seemed as though she could never forget the days when she ordered and he obeyed.

"Look here!" he began, bravely enough, but his heart sank when he met her fierce eyes.

"It's those Wyndham-Parkers, I suppose. Mean, cadging, calculating lot!"

"They're friends of mine. I won't have you talk like that."

"Oh, I know, and what they're after. But mark my words, Sir Hubert, once let them get foothold in the Hall, and they'll take possession of it, and you too. Cock them up, for a set of paupers, chucking their girls at every man's head!"

"They don't; and the girls ain't the kind to let them."

"You're silly about that white-faced one, Etta. More fool you? If you knew as much of her as I did!"

"What do you know against her?" Hubert asked fiercely.

"What every one else does but you," was the enigmatic reply.

"You must and shall tell me. Out with it! Go on!"

"Why, it's common talk. This Miss Etta has another lover; he comes down to see her on the sly."

"If I come across him, if I should ever meet them together"—a black murderous look came into Hubert's dark face,—"it will be the worse for him. I'd do for him, kill him before her very eyes!"

"Don't say that too openly, then, or the words may be remembered against you. Of course, it don't matter with me; I can hold my tongue. I've done so already," she added darkly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I am as wide awake as most people, and I have had the chance, perhaps, of seeing more."

Sir Hubert looked at her with astonishment.

"Are you threatening me? Don't do that; don't stir up my bad blood. I am not afraid of you—there's no reason why I should be—but——"

"But let's speak plain. It's a good opportunity, Sir Hubert, and I should like you to know what kind of woman I am."

Sir Hubert now seemed scared, as he listened with staring eyes.

"I'm not the sort to put up with an injury, nor do I easily forget a kindness. Scratch me, and I'll scratch you; but at the first crooked word, the first evil turn, I mean mischief."

"You can't harm me."

"I could ruin you, Hubert Lezaire, utterly, if only I held up my hand."

And with this, making a mocking defiant curtsey, the housekeeper left the room.

They did not meet again for a day or two. The Wyndham-Parkers came and filled up the Hall. Once again the spacious old dining-room echoed merry laughter; female skirts rustled along its hallis; the whole place was lightened and made pretty with the litter of work, the books and flowers, that women gather round them.

Mrs. Wyndham-Parker was a first-rate housewife. Sharp experience had taught her—experience gained in many lands with servants of every creed and color, but she had a truly Dutch love of cleanliness. Economy was her strong point, but she was an authority on butcher's meat, its cost and quantity, knowing to an ounce how much could and ought to be eaten. She was a perfect terror to her own housemaids as regards washing and dusting. Nothing escaped her quick eye; her nimble finger passed along the top of a chair instantly detected slovenliness or neglect. Before she had been twenty-four hours in Straddlethorpe Hall, she had looked very narrowly into its internal organization, and had come to the conclusion that it was her bounden duty to open Sir Hubert's eyes.

"My dear boy," she said—her manner was quite maternal by this time—"you really ought to know; I am afraid you are being robbed right and left. It's always the way with you poor men."

"Robbed! Who by?" the young baronet asked, not without misgiving.

"In the first place, your servants do not earn their keep, much less their wages. Why, the passage-windows have not been cleaned for months. But that's not the worst; I see by the books—the

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butcher's and grocer's, you know—that you are paying just forty per cent. too much for everything."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Wyndham-Parker? How did you find out?"

"I took the liberty, in your interests, of course, of speaking to the housekeeper——"

"Mrs. Leleu?" said Hubert, nervously.

"Is that her name? Yes, Mrs. Leleu. Well, I don't wish to make any unpleasantness, but, my dear Sir Hubert, if I were you I'd part with her—the sooner the better. If it's not her doing—I mean if she is not robbing you herself, she lets others do so, and therefore she is equally to blame."

"Oh, well, she saves me trouble; I can't be bothered with these things," Sir Hubert stammered out at last. Mrs. Wyndham-Parker's advice took him rather aback. What if this terrible housekeeper would not go? "If I send her away, some other beast will come and do just the same."

"There is only one kind of honest housekeeper for a man in your position, and that is—a wife."

He looked at her ruefully, and the fond mother interpreted it as grief at Etta's floutings.

But Sir Hubert was much more concerned at the prospect of words with Mrs. Leleu. He had, indeed, resolved to say nothing to her for the present—to attempt no fault-finding, to give her no hint of impending notice—when to his surprise the housekeeper herself broached the subject.

Mrs. Leleu sought him out in his own den—that which had been Colonel St. ^{isort} Tinson's.

"I'm not ^{to go to} put up with that woman's interference," she began, with intentional rudeness, as it seemed. "You must choose between us. I won't stay if she's coming to ride the high horse at the Hall."

"What woman, Mrs. Leleu? If it's any of the servants, you can bunk them all when you please."

"It's Mrs. Wyndham-Parker; and you know it as well as I do, Let her stay and skin flints at home, and lock up the bread-basket, and harry, and drive, and starve. Why, not a girl will stop at the Grove beyond her month. So make up your mind."

"If you really want to leave, Mrs. Leleu——" said the baronet timidly, trying fair words.

"I'll leave sooner than be put upon. But if I go, it must be made worth my while."

"You shall have a first-rate character——"

"Yah! I want more than a character. I don't mean to work any more. There's that between us—— Look here, Hubert Lezaire, you could not drive me out if I chose to stay. But I'd rather go, only you'll have to pay the piper."

"You can go to Mr. Tinson. He shall pay you——"

"I don't advise you to send me to Mr. Tinson, unless you're prepared for——"

" How much do you want ? "

" Five hundred pounds a-year to begin with—more if I choose to ask."

" I won't give you five hundred pence."

" Be careful, Hubert Lezaire; don't provoke me; don't drive me to use my power, for you are in my power—body and soul."

CHAPTER XLI.

GENTEEL PAUPERS.

A NUMBER of members were discussing Colonel St. Evelyn in the smoking-room of the "Battle-axe and Banner."

"St. Evelyn will have to go now, of course," said one man with the morning paper in his hand.

"The rule is explicit," said another, our acquaintance, General Wyndham-Parker, whose business—he dabbled a good deal in stocks and shares—often brought him up to town. "The committee cannot protect or defend him any longer. It was quite monstrous last time; he ought to have gone then."

"What happened, sir?" asked a youngster with great eagerness. He liked to be on familiar terms with a general officer, even one retired and undistinguished.

"Haven't you heard? I'll tell you the whole story." And the General, who stood first among button-holing, cease-tongued club bores, fastened at once upon his victim. He retailed everything—the marriage, the murder, the contest for the Lezaire estates.

"He was tried for his life, then?"

"Undoubtedly. And, as I pointed to the committee, he ought to have been called upon to resign the club."

"But, General, he was acquitted."

"All a mistake, a grave miscarriage of justice. The idea of keeping a murderer in the club!"

"He only killed his mother-in law. I'd like to make away with mine," said a red-nosed major whose female relations were too much for him, report said, and who certainly came to the club for the whiskeys-and-sodas he was denied at home.

"His brother-in-law, you mean. He wanted the property for his wife."

"Which he didn't get, every one knows that. But what has he done now?"

"Gone bankrupt. It's in the 'Times'; a receiving order granted. Here, look for yourself."

"I saw it as I came up to town," said the General, briskly. "I went up to the secretary's office directly I got here, to remind him that this St. Evelyn ceases, *ipso facto*, to be a member of the club."

"Ill-conditioned old curmudgeon!" was the red-nosed major's comment as the General hustled away. "Tramping on people who are down! Old Wyndham-Parker's got a special grudge against St. Evelyn."

"Oh! that's General Wyndham-Parker, is it?" said one of the previous speakers, a tall, slim young fellow with very white teeth, rather prominent eyes, and crisp curly hair.

"Yes; don't you know the old fossil!"

"I've never seen him before, but I have heard of him, and from him. Wish I hadn't." The speaker was Captain Sutton, Etta's Sam Sutton, who had had some unpleasant correspondence with the General with regard to the engagement.

"It's deuced hard upon St. Evelyn though. I'm sorry for him, and I'd like to do him a good turn if I could."

"So would I," added Sutton, "just to spite the General. Where does he hang out? Has any one seen him?"

"I was speaking to his man Gibbings—smart little chap, you know, often has a bit of news—he's at some livery stables in Kensington now—and from what he said—not much I admit—St. Evelyn's in Queer Street."

"What! got the knock?"

"Flat. He'll have to go under. What else is a fellow to do when he's clean broke?"

"Take a crossing, or travel as a courier, or turn commissionnaire."

"Or drive a bus, like Pump Middleton, who was in the Prancers. I give you my word, I saw him in the Edgware Road on the box, and a fellow, a sort of pay-sergeant or cash-clerk, came out and gave him two half crowns. And Pump told me—I got up alongside him—that those five bob a-day were all that stood between him and the workhouse."

"Well, and there's Chick Faulkner, who had all that Scotch property, kept a yacht and a string of hunters. He's got a lodging-house at Ramsgate, and wheels the perambulator when he isn't cleaning the knives."

"St. Evelyn's a managing business-like chap. He ought to find something to do."

"'Tisn't so easy at his time of life. Besides, the market's over-stocked with chaps like him. He'll find it hard, deuced hard, to get a fresh start."

It was simply impossible, that was the fact, and St. Evelyn after a month's trial began almost to despair.

They had a little lodgings in Hammersmith, one small sitting-room, a bedroom for themselves, and another for the three little children that now added so seriously to his anxieties for the future. A single servant, a grimy but good-natured marchioness, "did" for the whole house, and was more than willing to serve the St. Evelyns—high folk who had lived at a Hall and kept their own man. But she nearly drowned one of the babies in the bath, and half poisoned herself and her friend the policeman by deep potations of the Colonel's hair-wash, which was called Bay Rum.

Upon Rachel, the true-hearted, uncomplaining, always devoted wife, the gentle, delicately nurtured lady, fell much of the house-work : she was nurse, of course—Minta, the marchioness, was no more to be trusted ; she essayed to cook ; she plied the needle ; she “valeted” her Colonel, and strove hard to turn him out as smart as ever, well brushed and cared for, when he started on his long and fruitless pilgrimages in search of employment.

But there was one old staunch adherent and humble friend always ready to help and relieve her. Gibbings, sorely against his will, had yielded to the commands laid upon him by the Colonel, and had at last taken another place. He had become head-groom and confidential man at a large livery-yard in Kensington. But whenever he was free—on an evening and always on Sundays—he came over to Hammersmith and gave all his time to the St Evelyn's.

The old soldier could turn his hand to anything ; could rock a cradle, make soup, cook, and sew.

“I'll just run my eye over the master's things, ma'am.” The Colonel would be Gibbings's master for all time. “The boots will be the better for a touch of varnish, and I'd like to iron up his best hat,” he said one evening.

“The Colonel's wearing it, Gibbings. He had to keep a particular appointment.”

“Something he's heard of, ma'am ? Of course he'll get it. They've only got to know he's seeking employment, and all London will be bidding for him. What else can I be doing, ma'am ? I think I'll step down to the kitchen and see after the supper-tray.”

Next minute he was taking the little maid to task sharply.

“D'y'e call them tea-things clean, Minta ? A lick and a scrape won't do for me, or my master and mistress.”

“Taint my fault, Mr. Gibbons. I've been that driven and dratted to-day, I'm a-fit to tear myself to shregs.”

“Well, Minta, you ain't a bad sort, so dry your eyes. Some of these fine days I'll take you out and show you life. What'd you like best ? Tea and shrimps at Woolwich Gardens, or a trip to Harwich in the sixpenny roller ?”

“Will you though, Mr. Gibbons ? Will you take me for a walk when they gives me my next Sunday out ? I won't disgrace you. I've a new plush mantill, and a black satin skirt, and there's fruit and flowers in my 'at.”

“You can put 'em all on, only mind you wash your face. But there's the bell, and I think I hear your missus. You'd better hurry up, or she'll have your hair.”

The grimy maid ran off in answer to the loud shouts of “Araminta ! Araminta !” but presently returned to say—

“Your Colonel gentleman's come in, and the lady says I'm to take up the tray.”

“Stand off, Minta—no one touches that tray but me. But you can watch the chops—let them toast, d'y'e see, and turn them every three minutes by the clock. Mind now, or you won't go out next Sunday.”

When Gibbings entered the little sitting-room, he found the Colonel downcast, dejected, ruefully talking with Mrs. St. Evelyn.

"It was no good, my dear. I stayed there to the last."

"Where was it, dearest?"

"General Superintendent's office on the North-East Extension Railway. I had heard they wanted help in the traffic department."

"Who did you see?"

"The general manager himself, I believe. A gentlemanly fellow enough, and civil too, but he wouldn't have anything to say to me."

"Oh, Ferdinand!"

"It was the old story. 'What have you been? A Colonel? In the army?' 'Yes, the Halberdiers—commanded the second battalion.' 'Won't suit us. Good day.' I'm fit for nothing, that's the fact, I suppose."

"What! you, sir? The idea!" protested Gibbings.

"Good evening, Gibbings," said the Colonel. "I wish it depended upon your good word."

"You should have it, sir. We'd make you—what? Governor of the Bank of England, or Master of the Queen's Horse. Wouldn't we, ma'am?"

"Yes, Gibbings. But I tell the Colonel he must not be cast down. He's certain to succeed if only he perseveres."

"I'd take anything, anywhere—abroad even, although it might oblige me to go away alone."

"You wouldn't leave us behind, Ferdinand? I could not, would not leave you."

"But the children, my dear. Suppose I went to South America or to the Panama Canal; they want overseers there, and as I speak languages I might get a billet there. We could not take the children to a tropical climate."

Rachel was tortured to decide, but her wifely loyalty overcame the maternal instinct, and she said bravely—

"It would half kill me to part with the children, but where you go I go, Ferdinand, whatever happens."

St. Evelyn knew what it cost her to say this, and he kissed her tenderly.

"But why should you leave England, sir?" put in Gibbings. "I've an idea of something that would suit you, I think. Not much, perhaps, or very first class, but you could make a living at it, I'm sure."

"Well, what is it, Gibbings? Don't be afraid to tell me; I'm sure I'm not proud."

"It's in our line, livery, with a fair chance of buying and selling. Now, sir, with your eye for a horse and your knowledge, why, if you'd condescend to give your attention to it, why, there's money in it—a fortune, I do believe."

"And this business is going begging, Gibbings? It's to be had for the asking?"

"Not quite that, sir. But a hundred pounds would buy the good-will, and with another for capital——"

"I'm not worth two hundred pounds, Gibbings."

"No; but I am, sir. Ay, and more. And if so be as you'll accept the loan and let me work with you, sir——"

Rachel jumped from her seat and seized Gibbings's hand.

"My good Gibbings! how can we thank you for your kindness?"

"Tain't nothing, ma'am—if the Colonel will only say yes."

St Evelyn had not spoken: he was too much touched to find suitable words. But he too rose, and placing his hand upon his loyal henchman's shoulder, said presently—

"There are not many like you, my honest, trusty friend. You've been true as steel, staunch as an ash-plant, from the day I first took you until now. But I'm not going to rob you of your hard earnings."

"How could I have put 'em together but for you, sir?" replied Gibbings, with a husky voice. "You won't disappoint me, I hope, by refusing. We'd make a fine thing of it, sir, believe me."

"He will not refuse," said Rachel, gently. "It would be unkind, ungenerous, to refuse such an offer and from so true a friend."

"I won't. If nothing else turns up within this week, Gibbings, I will accept, and most gratefully, what you propose. There is my hand on it. And now let's have something to eat, for I'm sharp set."

The Colonel was never demonstrative, and he had made already an unusual display of feeling.

Minta brought up the chops, very much burnt and overdone, and feeling that Gibbings's eye was upon her, began to apologize.

"'Twarn't my fault, Mr. Gibbons. The fire was owdacious, and the postman come in the middle, and I had to take up second floor's lot—he goes on so about his preufs, as he calls 'em."

"Any letters for us, Araminta?" asked Mrs. St. Evelyn, gently checking the flow of explanation.

"Only this, ma'am," and Minta drew a long envelope from inside the waist string of her whitey-brown apron.

"For you, Ferdinand."

"From the North-Eastern Extension Railway! What can they have to say? Why, they didn't even ask my address."

He opened the letter. It was a brief but courteous offer of a situation as ticket-clerk at Harrop's Green at a salary of two guineas per week. If this was thought worthy of his acceptance, Mr. St. Evelyn was begged to reply without delay, as there were other applicants for the post.

"I don't understand it one bit," said St. Evelyn. "They held out no hopes while I was there."

"Who does the letter come from?"

"The general manager; he signs his name—Sutton."

"Sutton?" said Gibbings. "There was a Captain Sutton of the South Stalkshire came and found me out the other day, and asked a lot of questions about you, Colonel; wanted to know what you were doing."

"Did you tell him?"

"Not much, sir. But I gave him your address."

"I don't know why he should befriend me, but it seems as if he has. I can't explain it otherwise."

"And this offer—will you take it, Ferdinand?"

"It would be wicked to turn my back on such an opening. It will spare you, my good Gibbings, and may lead to better things."

CHAPTER XLII.

HARROP'S GREEN.

THE immediate result of the change in St. Evelyn's prospects was a change also in residence. They had to move at once to Harrop's Green, a small suburb in the north-eastern wilds of London, inhabited mostly by artisans and city clerks, all of whom travelled by the line in and out of town. There were one or two factories with large works in the neighborhood, and at no great distance a People's Palace and gardens, which on great *fêtes* and functions might be reached not without crowding and inconvenience from Harrop's Green.

The work into which St. Evelyn was soon initiated was intermittent, and varied from time to time. It began early, in the small hours indeed, the first workman's train in being at 4.30 a.m. It ended late, the last train out being at 1.30 a.m. But St. Evelyn had a mate who divided the total twenty-one hours of duty with him turn and turn about, taking early and late hours alternately.

"It's no worse than going on guard," said St. Evelyn cheerily, when his Rachel pitied him as he went off yawning. "Only I didn't expect to go back to subaltern's duty."

But his early training was of signal service to him now. Certain habits which had become second nature with him stood him in good stead. He had learnt as a soldier to be punctual and particular in the performance of his daily task. Tell him what to do and he did it exactly. He was never late for parade, even at early dawn; never late, although he had to shave by candle-light. This was another inviolable rule: to turn out for duty spick and span, as smart as soap and water and clothes-brush could make him. He would have felt it a disgrace to appear at the ticket-office in the slovenly, ungroomed, out-at-elbows condition of his fellow-clerk, a lanky, round-shouldered youth, who neither brushed his hair nor cleaned his nail, nor had his boots blacked from week's end to week's end.

Gentle Rachel, with her woman's adaptability, had quickly imbibed her husband's punctilious ideas, and was a willing, nay eager helpmate. She did her part as scrupulously as he did his. At the first sound of the alarm-clock she turned out of bed, lit the Etua,

prepared the shaving-water and the hot drink of chocolate which fortified St. Evelyn from the cold morning air; she brushed his overcoat and his now seedy but well-shaped hat, and saw there was no dust on the shiny boots St. Evelyn himself polished overnight. When she had sent him to his work, she busied herself like a charwoman—saw to the children and the house, prepared her husband's breakfast and took it to him herself, waiting by his side in the little den of an office while he ate it amidst the ledgers, and told her the morning's news.

It was nearly always the same story.

"Tremendous rush this morning: a hundred and seventeen tickets issued in less than an hour."

"And have you balanced your cash, dear?" asked Rachel, anxiously.

This was his great trouble. While still unfamiliar with prices, he often had to perform rapid sums of intricate mental arithmetic; calculate exactly the amount of fare and give the correct change. Not seldom he was wrong; when others suffered, he heard of it at once, generally in rough indignant language, but no one told him when the mistake was against himself. Of course he had to abide by his errors. The Company made no allowance for mistakes; deficits came out of the clerk's own pocket.

"Balanced it within three-halfpence, my child. But I was uncommonly near done, all the same."

"Bad money again? How wicked people are! What was it?"

"Half a sovereign, no less. But I found it out, luckily, and there was a fine row. As it was, they threatened to report me, and I suppose I shall hear more of it again."

"But were you sure it was bad, dear?"

"I wouldn't have been last week. But ever since Gibbings brought his friend the detective from the bank, I'd back myself to tell a dead 'un directly I touch it. But there, dear, I must not talk, I have got to enter my morning's work."

St. Evelyn opened one of the great ledgers labelled "Train Book," and proceeded to record the number of tickets he had issued to each station.

Meanwhile Rachel was engaged in packing up her basket, preparing to take her leave.

"I shall see you at lunch, dear, or rather dinner, at mid-day?"

"No; we will dine late to-night. And Gibbings is coming up, I fancy."

At this moment there was a rap at the ticket-window, to which St. Evelyn promptly responded.

"Can I get on to the Great Western from here, so as to catch the 9 15 express from Paddington?"

St. Evelyn hesitated. This was only one of dozens of similar questions asked him, but with his limited experience the answer was not immediately forthcoming.

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you? I shall complain to the general manager. What is your name?"

All this was spoken sputteringly, and in an abrupt, peremptory tone.

"I am very sorry," replied St. Evelyn apologetically, but with difficulty restraining his temper. "I am new to the work here——"

"It's preposterous. You ought to have been instructed before you were put on duty. How much longer am I to wait?"

"Not another second. I find you can just do it by taking the next through train to Westbourne Park."

"Very well. First return, Reading!"

St. Evelyn wetted his fingers on the sponge and drew a ticket from its particular tube, clicked it in the dating press, and threw on the window-ledge, saying—

"Eleven and seven."

There was a pause. The traveller was fumbling in all his pockets.

"Dear, dear, how extraordinary! My purse—I must have left home without it. I cannot pay, I'm afraid," he began.

St. Evelyn promptly drew back the ticket. Short as was his experience he was on the alert for fraud.

"What on earth am I to do?" went on the traveller, speaking to himself, but audibly. "I shall never have time to get back, and the carriage has gone. I suppose," he ventured to say, quite humbly, to St. Evelyn, "you won't trust me till this evening?"

St. Evelyn laughed, not unpleasantly. The complete change in the other's manner really amused him.

"It's distinctly against the rules, and if by any chance you should forget——"

"But I will give you my name and address. It is of the utmost importance to me to get to Reading at once—a matter of business that will not wait. What would you advise me to do?"

"I cannot advise," replied St. Evelyn stolidly. "If I gave you the ticket, it would be at my own risk, and I cannot afford to lose eleven and seven nowadays. It would make too big a hole in my week's salary."

"But you shan't lose it, I tell you. I give you my word."

St. Evelyn was still obdurate, when he heard Rachel whisper—

"Let him have it, Ferdinand. I think he is a gentleman. He speaks like one."

"You will give me your name and address?"

"Most certainly, and you shall have your money to-night, at latest. Will you give me a piece of paper and pen and ink?"

St. Evelyn opened the booking-office door and civilly invited the gentleman inside.

He was a stout, plethoric-looking man, with a crimson face and white hair.

"My wife," he said, "Mrs. St. Evelyn," introducing her as though she were a duchess; and Rachel's appearance, with the dignified

bow she gave the visitor, so satisfied him that he was in the presence of a lady, that he at once removed his hat. When he had written down his address, he handed it to St. Evelyn, and his eye fell with some surprise upon the ticket-clerk—upon the tall, straight figure of the neatly-dressed, well-mannered man who was an employee of the company at two guineas a week.

" You have not been here long, you say ? "

" Only five weeks."

" And you like your work ? It is new to you, I think ? "

" I have to earn my living," said St. Evelyn, simply. " But there ! " The telegraph signal clicked overhead. " There is the down train, and here is your ticket. You will only just have time."

" Who is it ? " asked Rachel, rather interested to know the name of the man to whom they had practically lent eleven and seven-pence.

" Carrington Lomas, Birch Hill House, Enfield, Herts," replied St. Evelyn, reading off the paper. " Never heard of him before, but I sincerely hope to hear of him again, and not later than this evening, as he said."

When St. Evelyn came home that evening from the railway station, he was triumphant.

" Look here, Rachel, do you like strawberries ? Here is a present for you from Mr. Carrington Lomas."

" He sent back the money, then ? "

" Yes, and these for you, with his compliments and a card. You deserve them. I should never have lent him the money but for you."

" He is an old dear. If he only knew how fond I was of strawberries ! And the children take after me."

" So does Gibbings ; you had better save some for him."

" Gibbings is here—hard at work, of course, from the moment he came in."

" Any news ? What have you got to say for yourself, Gibbings ? " he went on to his man, who at this moment appeared.

" Only this, sir, that I am going down to Thorpeshire next week. Any commands that way, sir, or you, ma'am ? "

" Shall you be near Straddlethorpe ? " asked the Colonel, while his wife sat sadly silent, thinking of the old home.

" Why, of course. I am going to Castle Stutterton horse-fair. It's not many miles across to the Hall, and I am curious to know how things go on there."

" So am I, " said the Colonel. " Mind you bring us a full and particular account."

" I will, sir ; and I will bring you, ma'am, as big a bunch of flowers as I can carry, if I have to steal them from the gardens on purpose."

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE HORSE-FAIR.

The annual horse-fair at Castle Stutterton was an event of more than local importance. It attracted buyers from all parts of the country, from the Continent even, and for some years had been visited by German cavalry officers, who bid for blood stock against the military representatives of the French republic.

The little village town was thronged; beds were at a premium; every stable, or outhouse that would serve as such, could have been let a dozen times over; and long lines of horses brought in from far and near were picketed all day in the principal streets of the place.

Gibbings, whose business was to buy a couple of useful hacks for his employer's livery work, found many friends at Castle Stutterton. He had come to be well known in Thorpeshire, and all Thorpeshire was here, the highest and the lowest. Lord Prudhames and the county magnates, horse-jobbers without end, gentlemen's coachmen on the look-out for their masters, and a perfect *posse* of tatterdemalion riff-raff—grooms, helpers, gipsies, and thieves.

"What cheer, Gibbings?—you back in these parts! What brings you here?"

The speaker was Thorndike, the ex-farm bailiff of Straddletorpe, with whom Gibbings had always been on fairly familiar terms.

"Mr. Thorndike, how goes it? Still at the old place?"

"Not I. I took my hook when the new baronet came. I didn't like it, but I couldn't serve such trash as that."

"How does he get along? Has he swore off?"

"'Tain't likely. But they do say he's sweet on one of the Hazelgrove girls, and that keeps him straight."

"I'd like to see the old place. Wonder whether they'd let me in at the Hall. Who's there now—any old friends?"

"All the upper servants left but Peters—even Mrs. Leleu."

"What! the black-faced housekeeper? That's news. I am surprised. She and Hubert were always such friends."

"It was too thick to last. Besides, think of their altered stations. And I'm told they had a stand up fight before they parted."

"Peters'll be the next, I take it."

"Not he, unless he's driven to it. He'd stand almost anything to keep his place. It must be worth a pretty penny to him."

"Will Sir Hubert be here to-day, think you?"

"As sure as eggs. He'll bring his team over. Tis t's the great game nowadays, driving a four-in-hand with a pack of mares on the box."

And that was how Sir Hubert Lezaire arrived. Gibbings was standing in the main street as the Straddletorpe drag drove up,

dexterously but rather recklessly handled by its madcap whip. The roadway was thronged, as I have said; hundred of horses stood in rows on each side—buyers came and went amongst them, some mounted, some on foot; there were other vehicles moving slowly along the crowded thoroughfare, and it was no place to bring up a four-in-hand so fast. But on came Sir Hubert, with horn and holloa and strident hi's! driving headlong into the press. The people parted hastily to either side, giving passage as best they could, but indignantly; and the excitement spread rapidly through the crowd, even to the horses, which winnied and stamped and plunged, greatly increasing the confusion of the scene.

"Pull him off! Knock him over! Drag him down!" were the cries that resounded on every side.

But Sir Hubert only flogged his horses the more savagely, contumuously, till his own team grew almost unmanageable and out of hand. The leaders reared, the wheelers put their heads down and pulled double. There were shrieks from the ladies; the grooms behind were preparing to dismount hastily to give help.

Just at this moment Gibbings rushed promptly to the head of the most restive horse the near leader, and partly by force, partly by soothing words, quieted him; then he shifted quickly to the off leader, and was equally successful.

"Thank you, my man, thank you. Come to me at the White Horse and I will remember you," cried the young baronet as he drove on, sobered and steadied by his late danger.

Gibbings an hour later put in an appearance at the White Horse, thinking less perhaps of his expected tip than of what Sir Hubert would say on recognizing him. But it was not easy to gain access to the young baronet. He had a luncheon-party, having secured two of the best rooms of the country inn and sent over everything from the Hall.

While Gibbings waited at the inn door, a gentleman who had passed once or twice and examined him rather curiously, came up, saying—

"If I am not mistaken, you are Colonel St. Evelyn's man, Gibbings?"

"That is my name," replied Gibbings, rather curtly.

"You don't remember me, I think—Captain Sutton."

"Why, of course, sir. I thought I knew your face. Come down to buy?"

"Well, yes, in a way. Are you very busy? Would you care to earn a sovereign? I want a helping hand."

"At your service, sir. Always glad to be of use to a gentleman, especially one as is kind to my old master—for you were that, weren't you, sir?"

Sutton laughed, but shook his head.

"It wasn't much I did, anyhow. I only spoke to my brother. But listen, Gibbings - there's a luncheon-party up-stairs, and some one at it I want to see."

"Not Sir Hubert, by any chance? I came to see him too."

"No, I will be frank with you—a young lady. Now when they all come down and go through the fair, as they are bound to do, if you could help to keep him—this Lezaire, I mean—and the rest of them while I have a few minutes' talk with the young lady, the sovereign is yours. That's what I want you to do. You understand?"

Gibbings touched his hat.

"I'm your man, sir. But may I make so bold as to ask who is the young lady? I might help you, you know, with the wrong one."

Sutton hesitated at first, then said—

"It's Miss Wyndham-Parker—Miss Etta."

"Her he's sweet on—Sir Hubert, I mean?"

Sutton winced.

"I fancy so. But now you know, see what you can do."

"Trust me to try my best, sir; you stand by. I have got to speak to Sir Hubert—he himself told me to come. The girl, the young lady, I mean, is sure to be with him, or we will wait till she is; then I will engage his attention. Only you be ready, sir."

Presently the whole party came down-stairs and into the street,—the little General and Mrs. Wyndham-Parker leading, then Mrs. Richards, the married daughter, and one of the other girls, then Captain Richards and Ica, last of all Sir Hubert and Etta, as Gibbings had supposed.

The stir and bustle of the fair centered at the White Horse, and there was much movement just in front of its entrance. The Wyndham-Parkers were soon involved in the crowd, father and mother pressing on all the more confidently as they knew or believed that their daughter Etta was in safe hands. But as planned, Gibbings went up to Sir Hubert at once, saying—

"You told me to call, sir. It was I who lent a hand with your team just now."

"Ah! it was you, was it? Well, you deserve half a couter. I'll stop it from Peters; the old fool ought to have been more slippery."

Sir Hubert felt in his pocket, handed Gibbings his half sovereign, and was turning to regain his companion, who had however already disappeared, when a hand was laid heavily on his shoulder, and an angry voice cried—

"I've found you, have I, you young Podifat Lezaire! I want five words with you."

"Stand aside! I don't know you—don't want to. Let me pass."

"Don't know me, you infernal young blackguard! You were glad enough to know me and mine last spring when you deluded my poor girl."

"You're old Fieldus, I suppose," said Sir Hubert, insolently. "What have you got to say to me?"

"Just this—but come along inside." Old Fieldus forced rather than led the young baronet into the inn yard, Gibbings following close. "I never thought to have to ask it, but you have got to

make an honest woman of my girl. You promised to marry her, and you shall."

"I'm d----d if I do! There!"

"I hardly hoped you meant fair by her, but now I'm down in your own country and find out your carryings-on. It's clear you want to break your word. But you shall pay for it, old as I am."

Mr. Fieldus seized Sir Hubert by the collar and flourished a heavy cutting-whip over his head.

"Old as I am," he repeated, "I will flog handsomely first and sue you in the courts afterwards."

In spite of Sir Hubert's struggles, Mr. Fieldus succeeded in administering one or two sharp strokes to the young man's back, when Gibbings interposed, separated the combatants, and stood between Mr. Fieldus and his prey.

"Here," said the old soldier, "you strike one of your own size and age. Don't mind him, Sir Hubert; I'll see fair play."

But by this time others, strangers and friends, had prevailed upon the infuriated chemist to desist from his assault, and had carried him off into the inn, still shouting loud threats against Sir Hubert Lezaire.

Gibbings, left master of the field, turned to the young fellow he had so seasonably championed, and said—

"Hope you are not hurt, Sir Hubert. What an audacious old villain! He ought to be put in a straight-jacket, or, anyway, have his whip taken from him."

Sir Hubert, at first sullen and crestfallen, made a great effort to regain his composure.

"That's the second time you've stood by me. Give me your hand."

"I was glad to help you, Sir Hubert. I suppose you don't remember me? It's Gibbings, who used to be at the Hall."

"Gibbings!" cried Sir Hubert, suspiciously. "What are you doing in Thorpeshire?"

"Come to buy horses for my masters Lund & Meldrum of Kensington."

"Then you are not with the Colonel now?"

"Dear, no, Sir Hubert! left him ages ago."

"Don't care to see him again, I suppose, now he's down in the world without a mag to bless himself with."

"That's about it. But how's all going on at the Hall, Sir Hubert?"

"Come over and see for yourself, any day after the fair; or this evening, for I think I shall go straight home."

He wished to put as many miles as possible between himself and Mr. Fieldus's horsewhip.

"I wonder what's become of all my lot? Good day to you, Gibbings: see you next time."

And with that the young baronet dived into the crowd to rejoin the Wyndham-Parkers. When he found them Etta was with them again, but she must have had a very pleasant half-hour's *tete-a-tete* with her devoted Sam.

CHAPTER XLIV.

LIBERTY HALL.

GIBBINGS did not despatch his business till the second day of the fair, when he bought his two nags and sent them up to town. It was on the third morning that he found his way to Straddlethorpe, and relying on Sir Hubert's invitation, went straight to the front door of the Hall.

"Sir Hubert?" responded the butler who opened it—a stranger to Gibbings, a watery-eyed, weak-kneed old man, battered but rubicund, who had probably found Straddlethorpe a haven of restful indulgence. "You can't see him."

"But he told me to call."

"You'll have to wait, then; he ain't down yet. Won't any one else do? Mr. Peters, perhaps?" answered the butler, after a shrewd look at Gibbings and his somewhat sporting attire.

"Well—I know Mr. Peters. We've been in service together."

"Not here? Yes? Why didn't you say so sooner? Come along in. Peters'll be in the servants' hall most likely. It's our time for a snack, and he generally joins us."

The "snack" was a liberal meal: cold joints, hot pies, sweet dumplings, and bread and cheese, flanked by jugs of new milk and foaming tankards of ale.

"Dinner ain't till three," went on the butler, with a thick sensual laugh, "and we have to keep ourselves up till then. Where's Mr. Peters?" he went on, looking round the room, in which some fifteen or twenty servants had assembled. "Not come in yet? Well, find a seat," he said to Gibbings. "Maybe there's some one else you know."

Gibbings saw only one he remembered amongst the lot of unfamiliar faces, a pleasant looking young housemaid, with a fresh color and honest eyes, beside whom he took his seat.

"It's a sight for sore eyes to see you so blooming, Susan Footit," he began.

"Lor', Mr. Gibbings, how you made me start! Who'd a thought of seeing you?"

"Still in the old place, then?"

"And very sorry too. I ought to have left when the change was made, but they gave me a rise. I'm upper housemaid now—"

"Then surely you're well off?"

Susan shook her head gloomily.

"It's a bad look-out for any decent girl in this house. It's hard to keep straight in it with such goings-on."

It was evident at a glance: waste, riotous living, licence of all kind holding high revel all through the house.

"Don't you like Sir Hubert? Isn't he kind?"

"Kind!" The quick blush that mantled in her cheek, the indignant scorn in her voice, were tell-tales that Gibbings easily understood. "He's too civil by half when no one else is by."

"I should give notice if I were you. Take another place."

"That's where it is, Mr. Gibbings. Who's to get a character from such a house as this? Who's to give one?"

"Why, the housekeeper, I suppose."

"Mrs. Leleu went three weeks ago. She'd had enough of him. There was a fine row between them. I could hear them from the china drawing-room, which I was dusting."

"Quarrelled, eh?"

"All but came to blows. Sir Hubert turned her out of the house, you may say, then and there."

"Has no one come in Mrs. Leleu's place?"

"There's no one engaged yet. Sir Hubert doesn't care. Everything may go to rack and ruin so long as he enjoys himself."

"He'll be getting married one of those days."

"He might like to, but the girl he most fancies won't have him, I expect, and that's what makes him so reckless. But I pity the woman who takes him. He was drunk again last night, he and the vile lot he brought over from the fair: no one could sleep for the row they made, singing and screeching and turning the Hall upside down. Married indeed! A fine husband he'll be."

"There are lots ready to be my lady and mistress of Straddle-thorpe. They might reform him, you know, Susan. When he's a little older he'll settle down."

"I don't think it, Mr. Gibbings. He's a bad un, or I'm much mistaken. Drinks to drown care. That's what Mrs. Leleu meant. I heard her plain enough."

"From the china drawing-room?"

"I was passing the study door just then. She said she had him in her power, body and soul. Why should she say that unless he'd done something wrong?"

"Was that all you heard, Susan?"

"All. The door was ajar, and I did not dare stay. But that much I caught, every word."

Gibbings looked round as Susan Footit made this strange and deeply interesting statement, fearing others might have heard it. But her voice had been low, and the business of eating and drinking too fully engrossed every one else at table.

What could be the hold Mrs. Leleu possessed over Sir Hubert? Surely none very effective, seeing that he had sent her away? But the point was worth investigating, and Gibbings would gladly have embraced any chance of remaining longer at the Hall to pursue his inquiry.

His good luck helped him.

Peters came in presently, blacker and more cross-grained than usual, and on hearing a friend was at table, drew near Gibbings, whom he at once recognized and addressed. But his greeting was the reverse of cordial.

"I might have guessed as much. I was sure some one had been doing me a dirty turn, and of course it was you," he said fiercely.

"Come, come, Mr. Peters," expostulated Gibbings; "fair and softly. What's amiss? What have I done to you?"

"I'll tell you out in the yard; there's room enough. Come out and take your coat off. I ain't so old a man that I can't give you a dusting. Come out, or I'll do it here," said the old coachman, with a threatening gesture.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" interposed the butler, "remember there's ladies in the room. You get out of this——" to Gibbings. "If Mr. Peters don't know you, you haven't no right in here."

"None of your cheek. I'll go or stay as it suits me. It depends on your master, who told me to come over, and you'd better take me to him."

"That's what I thought," cried Peters. "You've been poisoning the governor's mind against me. That's why he's given me the sack."

"I never spoke about you, or mentioned your name, you old fool."

"Call me that again!" began Peters, when the butler, fearing a serious row, carried Gibbings off, saying—

"Sir Hubert's up by this time. Come along—I'll tell him you're here."

Gibbings was not kept waiting long.

"He'll see you—in there" said the butler, half opening a door which Gibbings remembered as that of the Spanish chamber, the best bedroom in the house.

The room in which Sir Percy Lezaire had breathed his last; the room in which Mrs. Leleu had so strangely come upon the desk and documents that were to bring such a change over Straddlethorpe,—it was here that the present baronet spent half his mornings, bedraggled and bemused, just as he had tumbled out of the great tapestry-canopied, four-poster bed.

Here Gibbings found him, wrapped in a silk dressing-gown thrown carelessly over his night-shirt, with bare feet thrust into brocaded slippers, hair disheveled, chin unshorn. He lounged or lay in a wide easy-chair before a writing-table littered with bills and papers on which stood a tall tumbler and cut-glass decanter. Pale face and bloodshot eyes told a tale of overnight debauchery and inward pangs, which morning drinks could hardly assuage.

"The blackguard thief!" began the baronet. "The low, horse-coping scoundrel——"

"Meaning me, Sir Hubert?" asked Gibbings, with a smile.

"No; that cursed, cheating, gipsy-faced swindler, Peters. I've caught him in the very act. Harry Tamser warned me, but I wouldn't believe it. D'ye want a place, Gibbings? Take service with me."

"You're very good," answered Gibbings, but without enthusiasm. "I'm pretty well suited at this moment."

"You'd be far better off here at the Hall, and I believe I could trust you—you're not like that villain Peters."

"What's Peters done, Sir Hubert?" Gibbings wanted time to think over the offer.

"Sold me, a regular dog. It was about a pair of bays I bought at the fair. Two fifty Peters swore was the price, and I gave him the dibs to pay. Now I find—Tamser told me—that Peters only handed over a hundred and seventy; the rest he put in his pocket. That's only one of a dozen such tricks. Just look at this corn bill."

Gibbings followed Sir Hubert's hand, which pointed to the writing-table, and saw there the corn bill and something more.

It was a letter, addressed in a scrawling ill-formed hand to

"MRS. LELEU,

BUENA VISTA,

BULKELEY WELLS."

"Can he be writing to her?" Gibbings asked himself at once. "In correspondence with a servant so recently discharged?" Surely there was ground for suspicion in this; it strangely emphasized what Susan Footit, the housemaid, had overheard.

"Well, Sir Hubert," said Gibbings, now anxious to keep friends, "I never thought much of that Peters. I promise to serve you better than that. Would you engage me as coachman?"

"As stud-groom, master of the horse, confidential man; what you please, Gibbings. Any of the lads could drive, but I mostly handle the ribbons myself."

"When would you want me, Sir Hubert?"

"Now. I've just kicked Peters out, and I'd like you to take his place at once. What d'ye say?"

"Wages, sir?"

"Sixty, and all found. It's worth more than that, for I don't ask many questions, only I won't be robbed wholesale. Peters must have done me out of hundreds."

"It's a sin and a shame to take advantage, Sir Hubert, and you shall find no such fault with me. I'm your man."

Any last doubts were finally disposed of by the sight of an open cheque-book alongside the letter to Mrs. Leleu. The page uppermost showed a cheque partly filled in—

"Pay Mrs. Leleu, or order, two hundr——"

"Writing to her and sending her money! Beyond question she has him in her power. I'm in luck to get a chance of staying on at the Hall," were Gibbings's reflections as he went down-stairs. "I should be a fool now not to try and find out what all this means."

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CHAPTER XLV.

THE POLICE AGAIN.

GIBBINGS fell into his place very quickly at the Hall. The other servants looked askance at him, fearing that as he had supplanted Peters he might betray them in their turn. It was a first principle with the Stradklethorpe servants, as with most others, that whatever went on below, honor forbade tale-bearing up-stairs.

But Gibbings had no idea of setting his fellow-servants against him. He was at the Hall for a particular purpose. His business was to watch and wait; to do this, he must live and let live, going his own way quietly, without pretending to be more honest or more virtuous than his companions. Any ill-feeling on their part might make them suspicious and attract too much attention to himself.

His first and principal wish was to ingratiate himself with his new master. To do this he studied Sir Hubert's tastes and adapted himself to his ways. The former were low, the latter loose; but Gibbings was an old soldier who could take kindly to any line of life, more especially to one which promised him pleasant times. His duties as stud-groom were not severe; the general superintendence of the stables was the hardest part of them. The helpers did all the rough work, and Gibbings knew how to keep them at it. He himself was free to come and go as he liked after an early hour of the day, but it suited him best to be always handy--always at the baronet's beck and call.

The young fellow soon came to take a pleasure in Gibbings's society. He found that the old soldier could descant at length upon the two topics--horses and women--that had the deepest, the only interest for Sir Hubert Lezaire.

"Ah! but you should see them Spanish girls, Sir Hubert," said Gibbings one day as they were smoking together and chatting quite confidentially at the harness-room door.

Pretty Susan Footit had just tripped across the stable-yard, and Gibbings had noted the admiring look and wink that had followed her trim figure.

"What are they like? Dark, brown-skinned, slomachy? I like 'em fair, and neat, and plump--like yon."

"They've got light-haired ones too. *Rubias*, they call them--that's to say, red, ruby red. But such figures! They walk like queens. They don't walk; they do what our sergeant-major tried to teach the raw recruits--they glide."

"I don't fancy 'em, Gibbings. I know a gal'd give 'em three stone and a beating round any course."

"No need to tell me your taste, Sir Hubert; I can see that for myself. Beg pardon if I make too bold but when's the happy day?"

Sir Hubert shook his head gloomily, then clenched his fist and struck it against the door-post.

"I don't get no forwarder, Gibbings. One day she's all smiles and smirks, the next scowls and sneers, and you may walk your chalks."

"Stick up to her, Sir Hubert. They're like horses; take 'em by the head and master 'em. They like you all the better when they give in."

"There's some one else before me, I'm thinking. If I was sure of it, I'd knife him." A murderous look crossed the young fellow's evil face.

Gibbings remembered Captain Sutton, but saw no reason, and felt indeed it would be unsafe, to tell Sir Hubert what he knew.

"Speak up to her, I say. Look what you've got to offer her. Few fellows would have any chance against you and all this," waving his hand towards the Hall and its surroundings.

"Maybe you're right. If I only had the pluck! But then there's this beastly Fieldus case."

"What's that, Sir Hubert?"

"The old sportsman who struck me—curse him!—at the fair. He's brought an action, damages £20,000. As she was under age—his daughter, you know—they may bring it in felony perhaps, and Tinson says I may have to go to jail. I can't think of it. It makes me mad. Come in and have a dram."

The sideboard in the Hall dining-room was always well garnished. Sir Hubert had developed a nice taste in liqueurs, and he now filled himself a claret-glassful of benedictine, while Gibbings took his Scotch cold—the whisky first neat, then the water.

"I think I'll go over to Hazelgrove," said Sir Hubert, emboldened by his nip. "I must see her. Ring, Gibbings, and tell them to saddle Devilskin."

Sir Hubert was already in the saddle, and was on the point of starting, when the butler came out, saying—

"Beg your pardon, Sir Hubert, but the police have called."

"The police! What do they want here? Who sent them?" Sir Hubert's voice shook slightly, and his sallow face changed color.

"The inspector most particularly wishes to speak to you, Sir Hubert; said I was to tell you it was very important and couldn't wait."

"Where are they? How curiously annoying!"

Was this strong language meant to feign unconcern?

"They are in the housekeeper's room, which I use now, Sir Hubert. They have got a prisoner with them—leastways some one they took up this morning."

"What's all that to me? I'm in a hurry, don't you see? Tell them to go to the nearest magistrate. I'm not on the beach."

It was rather a sore subject with Sir Hubert that the lord lieutenant had positively refused to put him in the commission of the peace.

"If I understood rightly, they wished to take your orders before proceeding in this case. But here they are, Sir Hubert: the inspector will tell you himself."

At this moment two of the county constabulary in uniform came round the shrubbery from the offices; between them was a rough-looking, middle-aged man, in a suit of new corduroy, with a slouch-hat. He was clearly under restraint, although not actually a prisoner and handcuffed. Behind was a fourth person, our old acquaintance Mr. Earswick, an inspector now, but still in plain clothes.

"Where is the inspector?" asked Sir Hubert, abruptly. "Why am I worried in this way? What does it all mean?"

Earswick stepped to the front, and touching his hat, civilly said—

"I am responsible for this, sir. These constables reported to me that they had seen this man loitering round the keeper's lodge near Bingley wood last night. We believe this morning he must have broken into it, from the look of the outer gate. The house is unoccupied, as I think you know."

No answer from Sir Hubert, who, from the moment the police approached him, had been fidgeting with his stirrup-leather and keeping his face averted.

"The fellow is an old convict," went on Earswick. "Blagrove here, a very old officer, has recognized him as a notorious poacher who was sent to penal servitude some nine or ten years ago. I have found that he is now on licence—in fact, he reported himself at Market Reepham two or three days ago. As a ticket-of-leave man he is liable to arrest if seen under suspicious circumstances, affording grounds for charging him with intent to commit a felony. So we laid hands on him this morning, and have brought him here to complete the case. Was your north lodge by Bingley broken into, sir, last night?"

Devilskin, Sir Hubert's horse, a tall, large-boned hunter, was very troublesome this morning. It had been fidgeting about while the police officer was speaking, and now began to plunge and half rear as though mad to make a start.

Gibbings, who had his eye on his master, traced the horse's restiveness to its right cause. Sir Hubert had been at him constantly with his spur.

All this time the prisoner had stood sullen and silent, with downcast eyes and the injured air of a man wrongfully accused.

Gibbings spoke for his master—

"We've heard nothing about any burglary here. It's another of your trumped-up cases. You're a fine lot, you Thorpeshire police."

Earswick winced, and answered angrily, surveying Gibbings from head to foot—

"Oh, it's you, is it? What brings you back to the Hall?"

"I'm not obliged to give an account of myself to you. Perhaps you'd like to take me into custody too, as a suspicious character."

Sir Hubert, who, seemingly to ease his horse, had ridden a few lengths away, now called Gibbings to him.

"Send them about their business," he said in a low voice, leaning over his saddle. "I don't want to have anything to do with the case. They must act without me."

Gibbings communicated the message with alacrity, adding—

"Now, Mr. Earswick, you'd better walk your chalks. Let this poor old devil go—you've got nothing against him. It's like you, getting the wrong sow by the ear."

"I shan't let him go; there's quite enough against him to run him in. Convicts on licence have no right to be loafing round gentleman's parks, particularly old poachers; and the Bench shall deal with this chap this very day, with or without Sir Hubert Lezaire."

For the first time the prisoner lifted his head, and speaking with sudden animation, said—

"D'ye call yon chap Sir Hubert Lezaire?"

"That's about it," answered Gibbings. "Sir Hubert Lezaire, Baronet, Master of Straddletborpe Hall, and the surrounding lands as far as you can see. And what might you call yourself when you're at home?"

"His name was Podifat when he was last in these parts," replied Blagrove, the constable, for him. "He was one of the under-keepers on this very estate when they took him for night-poaching and got him ten years."

"Come along, bring your prisoner," interrupted Earswick shortly. "We've no more time to waste here."

"See you next time," sang out Gibbings cheerily to the retreating police officer; and then with his hands in his pockets and softly whistling an old regimental quick-step, he re-entered the Hall.

CHAPTER XLVI.

OLD PODIFAT.

THERE were three magistrates sitting on the Bench at Market Reepham that morning, when "licence-holder Podifat," as he was officially styled, was brought before it. One was old Mr. Etherly of Etherly, the other the Rev. Mr. Lee, a clergyman-magistrate, the third, General Wyndham-Parker.

"The case is perfectly clear," said the parson when the brief evidence was heard, inclined to take the hardest course. "I say revoke his licence and add six months."

"Bless my heart! not at all," objected Mr. Etherly. "There is nothing to show he meant mischief."

"Well, but what took him to Bingley, I should like to know?" asked the little General. "He was clearly trespassing on the Lezaire property."

"Then let young Lezaire bring an action for trespass. I don't see it's our business to interfere."

"He was after the pheasants, I'll go bail. A rank old poacher."

"I agree with you, General," said Mr. Lee, "and think he ought to be sent back to jail."

"Well, you're two to one. But we ought to hear anything the prisoner may have to say. His name is not quite unfamiliar, and he may have some excuse," protested Mr. Etherly. "Ask him, General."

The foregoing conversation had passed in whispered tones amongst the magistrates, whilst Podifat in the dock below anxiously awaited their fiat.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" asked the General, abruptly. "What took you to Bingley? What were you after?"

"No harm. I used to live there, in the keeper's lodge. I only wanted to see the old place again."

"A very satisfactory reason," said Mr. Etherly, *sotto voce*.

"When did you live there? In what capacity?" went on the General, less confidently.

"I was under-keeper in Sir Percy Lezaire's time."

"Can any one verify this?"

Blagrove, a veteran officer, at once corroborated the statement, which Mr. Etherly also supported.

"Besides, I want to see my boy, the lad as I brought up and treated as my own child till they tore us apart."

Podifat said this in a whining, lachrymose tone, intended to express the deep-seated emotions of his affectionate heart.

"What boy?" asked the General, unguardedly, while Mr. Etherly smiled maliciously, anticipating the reply.

"Him as is now master—the young baronet. Little Hubie, whom I nussed and taught to make cartridges and tie flies."

"Our young friend's foster-father, in fact," whispered Mr. Etherly to the General. "Do you still think he ought to go back to jail?"

The General looked as if he would like to have sent Podifat much farther than Market Reepham jail, and it was with rather a crest-fallen air that he admitted—

"I think perhaps we had better dismiss the case."

Podifat accordingly was set at large. As the prisoner left the court, General Wyndham-Parker left the bench. Taking Earswick aside, he said—

"Keep your eyes upon that man. I should like to know what becomes of him. He is bound to report himself, I suppose, to the police?"

"Here or elsewhere, sir."

"Elsewhere would be better. Why not get him to go out of the neighborhood?"

"It might be done, sir. He's a kind of chap that'd go anywhere for a consideration."

"Well, just find out, will you, what he will take to go—say to London, or the Hebrides, or the Isle of Man? He can only be an annoyance to Sir Hubert Lezaire if he remains in Thorpeshire. Only let me know what's his price."

General Wyndham-Parker, be it understood, had no intention of

paying it, however small. The cost would, of course, fall on the young baronet, whom he intended to see without a moment's loss of time. His desire was speedily fulfilled, for on his return to Hazel-grove he found Sir Hubert there at lunch.

The baronet was not in the best of spirits. He sat black and gloomy at an almost untasted meal. Only the General's dry sherry—none of the best—had found favor with his would-be son-in-law. But the wine, having little effect upon his seasoned brain, had soured rather than exhilarated him.

Miss Etta, too, had been more than usually ungracious. It was one of Sam's days; a letter from her absent lover, received that morning, completely filled her thoughts.

After lunch, more sulky and cross-grained than ever, Sir Hubert asked for a brandy-and-soda, which he drained at one gulp.

"You seem out of sorts to-day," said the General, sympathetically.
"By George! I'm not surprised."

"Hey! What! How do you mean?" asked Sir Hubert, startled.

"Why, of course about Podifat. To think of the old rogue showing his face at Straddlethorpe again!"

"You know that? Then you have seen him. Are you sure?"

"Certain. He was before us to-day at Petty Sessions. The police brought him up for infringing the conditions of his licence."

"And what did you do with him?" asked Sir Hubert, eagerly.
"Sent him back to jail, I hope—or further."

"We couldn't, although I wished it. But he ought to go away, and will, I think, if you make it worth his while."

"How is it to be managed? I'm ready to do what's right. I don't want to have him on my back, you may be sure."

"I daresay I can do it for you, through the police, if only you authorize it. How much will you give?"

"Anything in reason, so long as I don't see him again. I leave it all to you."

Through the good offices of his friend General Wyndham-Parker, Sir Hubert was spared a personal visit from his foster, or more exactly once putative, father. Podifat consented to take a lump sum, fifty pounds down, and a weekly allowance of two sovereigns, on condition he did not come within twenty miles of Straddlethorpe.

But at the end of the first week old Podifat had broken the agreement. Either the condition was irksome, or Podifat wanted more; for he reappeared at Straddlethorpe, coming boldly now to the hall door and asking openly for Sir Hubert. A very different man to the slouching unkempt creature whom the police had run foul of, and captured red-handed, as they thought, in Bingley wood.

Podifat had applied a portion of the funds provided by his liberal patron to the purchase of new clothes. Memories of his old calling as gamekeeper had governed his choice. He was arrayed in great glory; clean drab gaiters adorned his short bandy legs, and glossy velveteens his thick-set figure, while a gorgeous yellow kerchief, tied loosely, encircled his brawny neck, and threw up into strong

relief his walnut dark face, and the coarse curly black hair, still scarcely streaked with white.

He gave his name impudently to the butler, and would take no denial.

"Sir Hubert not in? Lies! I saw him pass the lodge. He's got to see me right away. Say that now, and don't you keep me waiting long."

The brusque threatening tone of the message must have been passed on to Sir Hubert, for the young baronet was not at his ease when he received Podifat. But he faltered out a slight protest.

"Didn't you promise to clear out, to go away and keep away?"

"Yah! 'Twarn't good enough, Masser Hubie—Sir Hubie, suppose I orter say. Can't bear not to see you oftener, sonny."

"Get out, you grinning jackass!" cried the master suddenly to the butler, who, having introduced the visitor, still stood familiarly inquisitive at the door.

Purfrey fled, and thus only a garbled and incomplete report reached the servants' hall. But already tongues had been wagging shrewdly, and the return of the master's foster-father was freely discussed down-stairs. No one remembered Podifat personally, but strange traditions still survived of the wild life he had led. To these were soon added many stories, and much scandalous gossip about the queer doings that followed his reappearance at Straddle-thorpe.

The old fellow soon seemed master of the situation. He came and went constantly, and did always much as he pleased. After his second visit, but his first really formal call, he took up his residence at the north lodge, his old home, where he lived a solitary, but—to judge from the furniture and supplies sent in—a not quite joyless life. He was called an under-keeper, but he took no orders from any one, and accepted none of the responsibilities, discharged none of the duties, of the post. All he cared for was the licence Sir Hubert took out for him to shoot and fish—the first with the splendid Purdey he himself picked out of the gun-room at the Hall, the latter with the first-class fishing-tackle similarly supplied.

Certain coverts, a particular length of stream, were reserved for old Podifat's own use. Why?

A little because Sir Hubert did not choose that his foster-father should run up against the more aristocratic sportsmen who came by invitation to the Hall; more because Podifat had expressed his sovereign dislike of being crowded up and interfered with by strangers.

It was quite clear that the old poacher's will was law at the Hall. Sir Hubert was even more afraid than ashamed of the man who had been his guardian in early years.

No one saw this sooner or more plainly than Gibbings. But for once the shrewd veteran was at fault, and unable to explain the riddle.



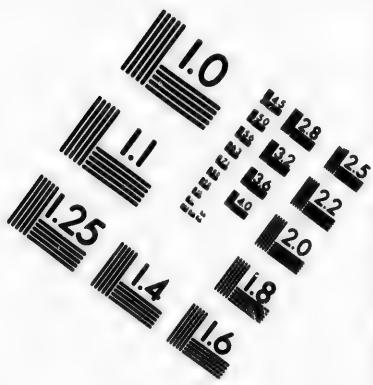
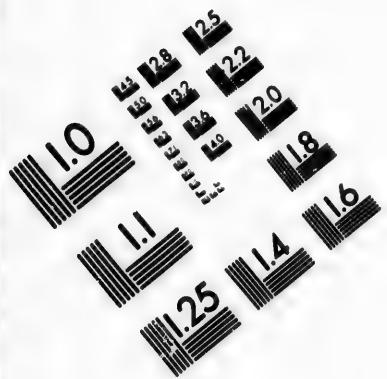
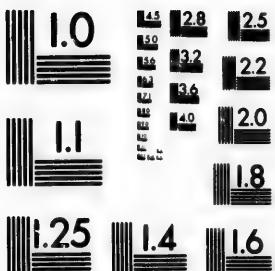
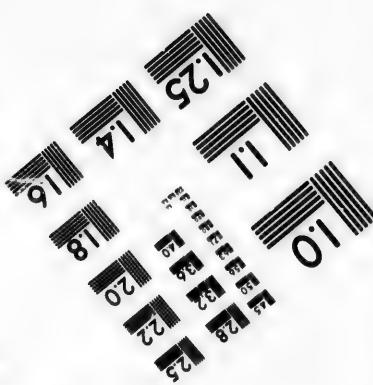
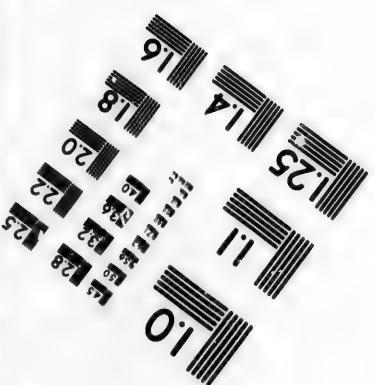


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CHAPTER XLVII.

AN OLD POACHER.

THE news of Podifat's return to Straddlethoree, and the easy terms on which he lived there, soon spread and was freely commented on by the county. Some saw in it a fresh proof of Hubert's low tastes; a few, chief among them General Wyndham-Parker, thought the young baronet was showing up well, and praised his great goodness to the man he need hardly have recognized at all.

"It was not what I advised him," the General frankly confessed. "I saw no reason why he should be burdened with the old rascal, and said so."

"Lezaire may be as kind as he pleases to his old father—ex-father I suppose we ought to call him—but he'd better have done it further away."

"He was ready to pension him, and actually did pay down a handsome sum for him to go, but the old rogue turned up again within a week," General Parker admitted, rather indiscreetly.

"Did he now? Well, that looks rather fishy, I think. Why should he offer him money to go unless he was afraid of him—ashamed rather?" protested the first speaker. "And with reason."

"Yes, begad! and he'll be more ashamed still, unless the rascal mends his ways. The old poacher's bound to get his young friend into a mess," said a squire whose lands "marched" with Straddlethorpe.

"How's that?" asked the General, a little nervously.

"My keeper tells me he has a strong suspicion this old Podifat has been after my young pheasants. Found some wire traps in my spinney t'other side of Straddlethorpe, which no one but Podifat could have laid."

"He's not particular about boundary-lines. Some one saw him with his gun on Bingley moors, miles from Lezaire land, in broad daylight too."

"I believe it was he who netted my pools," said another squire.

"I'll set the police on him if he comes my way," added a third.

"Don't, please, take any steps until I have spoken to young Lezaire," the General entreated. "I am sure he only has to know what his *protege* is about to stop it peremptorily."

But Sir Hubert seemed strangely disinclined to interfere with his "old father," as Podifat was generally called about Straddlethorpe.

"I don't believe he has touched a feather or caught a fish off my land," said the baronet. "Why should he? He gets sport enough with what I've given him."

"If you were just to hint to him, to suggest a little more caution——"

"I don't believe a word of it all, I tell you."

"But there must be something in it. So many persons were talking of it at the club, and all agreed in suspecting him."

Sir Hubert cursed the club and its long-tongued gossips, and refused point-blank to speak to his "old father."

Complaints were still made, more specific and seemingly unanswerable. The police were obliged to take the matter up; so Mr. Earswick, who knew the way to Straddlethorpe, and had been concerned in the first dealings with Podifat, was despatched with a polite message to the Hall.

"I was to say, sir"—the police officer tried to tone down the threat—"that Captain Bracebridge would be truly sorry to act. But if gentlemen continue to complain, there will be nothing for it but to take out a warrant——"

"Against me? I like your cheek."

"Well, sir, you might be charged with harboring, perhaps, but no worse. I don't suppose you're likely to turn poacher——"

"Thankee; I've half a mind to kick you out of the place."

"No offence, Sir Hubert. Only, upon my word, we shall have to take this Podifat up if he goes on so."

Sir Hubert looked up uneasily.

"What can I do? What do you wish me to do?"

"Speak to the man—warn him—stop his allowance—turn him adrift. A word from you would settle everything."

"I wish I thought so," muttered the baronet between his teeth; but he added aloud, "I'll speak to him—one of these days."

It was not next day, or the day after, but more than a week later, that Sir Hubert summoned courage to attack his troublesome guest. Even then he had fortified himself for the interview by copious glasses of liqueur. The decanter stood handy by his elbow as he harangued the truculent Podifat fiercely in the dining-room with the table between them.

"Look here, I won't have it," said Sir Hubert, brave enough now, his evil face flushed with drink, his voice thick. "I've stood it long enough. You are bringing disgrace on me, and worse on yourself."

"What am I doing now?" asked his "old father," insolently.

"Poaching. Can't you drop it? Why aren't you satisfied with my coverts and my waters?"

"Your coverts? Your waters? Yah!" There was boundless contempt in the words thus mockingly repeated. "I'll tell you why I ain't satisfied. Cos I ain't got room. Why, where I comes from a man's free to shoot whatever he sees; there ain't no preserves, no game-laws, no police."

"You'd better go back there. I'll help you to that any day."

"Thank ye. I know where I'm well off, and that's here."

"Where you won't stop much longer, I tell you. If I hear any more complaints, out you go, neck and crop."

"Who'd put me out? You?" Podifat put both his hands on the table and stared impudently at Sir Hubert on the other side.

"You daren't; you know better. Just say another cross word and I'll go straight to Lady Lezaire. I know where to find her."

If he thought to cow the baronet by this threat, he missed his mark. Sir Hubert was now furious, and his reply defiant.

"Go where you like—to the devil, or further; I'm done with you. Try your worst."

"If I do, you won't stop long here, I give you fair notice."

"Be off! Clear out!" Sir Hubert had gulped down a fresh dose of benedictine. "I'll have you put out," and he tore violently at the bell-handle behind him. "Here!" he cried to the butler, who was strangely close at hand, and Gibbings, who followed, "put this fellow out. I've had enough of him. He's got to go straight out of Straddlethorpe. He shan't stay on my land or under roof of mine. You see to it, Gibbings. Hustle him, kick him, bundle him out."

"You'll be sorry for this," shouted Podifat, as he struggled with the two servants who were dragging him to the door. "I shall go to my lady and tell her all about you, you miserable, murderous young cur!"

"Come," said Gibbings shortly, as they deposited Mr. Podifat outside the hall door, "we've had enough of your jaw. You've got notice to quit. I'll call round at your quarters before sundown and see the last of you."

"You'd better not come alone, though I'm man enough for half-a-dozen like you. My Purdey shoots straight, and I'll fill the first man's stomach with small-shot that comes within range of North Lodge."

With that he pulled himself together, and muttering threats and oaths, strode down the avenue.

Gibbings was resolved, in spite of what Podifat had said, to pay him a visit. It was his duty, in the first place, to carry out Sir Hubert's wishes; and in the second, the few words let drop by the old poacher when expelled from the Hall had made him anxious to hear more. But brave men may be prudent, and Gibbings was wise enough to wait till next morning, and to approach North Lodge with considerable circumspection.

The house, a semi-Gothic structure, having its principal rooms on the ground-floor and only garrets under the eaves, stood on the edge of the Bingley wood in a little clearing facing the highroad. A wicket gave admission through the high fence of the park.

From under cover of this fence Gibbings carefully reconnoitred the premises before he essayed to enter. Sounds as of some one moving about the house fell upon his ear, quickened by the sense of coming danger. Then as he peered through a chink between the palings, he saw the front door open and a figure issue forth.

"A sortie from the garrison," he muttered. "Can he have seen me coming? How about the Purdey! Holloa! why—"

He suddenly straightened himself up and boldly walked towards the wicket-gate, through which he passed, and crossing the neglected garden-patch, cried aloud—

"Mr. Earswick! You're not the man I thought to see here. What's up?"

"Nor I you. What brings you? Is this Podifat a friend of yours?" asked the police officer, suspiciously.

"Not much. I'm here because my master sent me. Sir Hubert gave the old scoundrel notice to quit yesterday, and I came to send him to the right-about."

"He's gone, and well for him, or I'd have had him safe enough this time in Market Reepham jail."

"Ah?" asked Gibbings, interrogatively. "Were you going to take him away?"

"I should have asked for a warrant this very day. There's evidence enough here to get him a fresh lagging. Come along and see."

Podifat appeared to have occupied only one room of the long unused and greatly dilapidated lodge. This was the kitchen, or keeper's living-room, the appearance of which spoke volumes as to the character and ways of its late occupant.

In one corner lay a pile of newly cut fir-boughs, the primitive bed-place of the old savage; the hearthstone was covered with wood embers—Podifat had evidently disdained to use the kitchener; all round lay the litter and filth of weeks—scraps of food, garbage, and refuse of all kinds; empty bottles in dozens, whisky-jars, a battered kettle, a dirty frying-pan inch-deep in grease.

"See here!" said Earswick, kicking over with his foot a great bundle of rags and sacking.

"Look at that hamper, and the label: Castro, the poultreer of Market Reepham. This is where he gets his game. And look at those pheasant's feathers. The shooting don't begin for another three weeks; he's been trapping them, and killing salmon too, in the close time."

"Has he cleared out, do you think?" asked Gibbings, a little disappointed at having no further conversation with the baronet's "old father."

"I expect so, but hardly for good. Is gun's there still, and a lot of cartridge-cases newly filled?"

"He meant them for some of us, I expect. We'd better stop that game," said Gibbings, as he filled his pockets with the cartridges. "You take the gun, mister, and come along. We'll lock up the place, and I'll take the key back to the Hall."

"We may as well walk through the house before we leave it. This is the only room I've been in."

From the kitchen they passed across the little hall to what in its best day had been the parlor—and empty chamber with blackened ceiling, and paper hanging loose on the damp walls.

"He didn't use this room much."

"As I understand, no one has lived in the house for years till just lately. I remember, the Colonel talked of doing it up and putting in another under-keeper."

"We may as well look up-stairs all the same. I've been taught not to do my work by halves."

The garrets were reached by a steep staircase little better than a

ladder, which ended on the threshold of the first, a narrow cupboard-like den, ankle-deep in dust, with a door that was locked, leading no doubt to a second room, to which one vigorous kick gave admission. The second garret was as dusty and dirty as the first, and like it, empty, as it seemed.

Gibbings and the police officer gave a short look round, and were on the point of retracing their steps, when the latter said casually—

"What's that over there under the rafters? A box? Lend a hand, will you? Let's have it out," and together they dragged it near the gloomy window.

It was a common deal box painted stone color, with edges and angles dented and battered, but still stout and strong. On the lid two capital letters had been rudely painted in white by some un-skilled hand.

"H. P." said Gibbings, meditatively. "What does that spell? Half-pay?"

"Hubert Podifat, perhaps," suggested Earswick. "There may be something inside to tell us more. The box is locked. Step down will you, and fetch the chopper from the kitchen. We will force it open."

It was a secure lock, but it yielded soon to force, and the lid was raised.

"Only old clothes," cried Earswick, disappointed, as he rummaged amongst the contents, turning them all out upon the floor. "Stinking rags at best. We'd better have let them alone. This looks a little better, though. Why, what in heaven's name have we here?"

"A greatcoat—an ulster! The Colonel's, by all that's glorious!" cried Gibbings. "I could swear to it amongst a thousand."

"Yellow plaid with red lines. The one that was missing at the trial, eh? How on earth did it come here?"

"Perhaps you think we hid it, Mr. Peeler. If so, d'ye think I'd have let you find it here to-day?"

"How could you have stopped me?" asked Earswick, suspiciously.

"I never tried, and I didn't want to. But what's the good of wasting time and talk. You can't try my old master twice, I know the law. And if you could, finding this coat wouldn't help you much. But, please God, it'll do better than that. It'll lead us yet to those who committed the crime."

"I believe you're right, Mr. Gibbings. It certainly supplies a fresh clue."

"Which we will follow out together, Mr. Earswick, if it suits you; working with and not against each other this time, if you'll be advised by me."

"And what shall we do with the coat meanwhile? We ought to have it."

"So you shall. Take it to your chief at Market Reepham, and tell him where you found it. But let's clear out of this double quick. Podifat or no Podifat, we've done a good morning's work."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CHANGING PROSPECTS.

The discovery of the Inverness was undoubtedly a new departure. Even Earswick felt this, although with professional caution he pretended still to be sceptical. But Gibbings had no prejudices to overcome; besides, he was positive where the police officer was still open to doubt. Earswick might suspect that Gibbings was concerned in the concealment of the cloak; Gibbings, better informed, was certain he had had no part in it.

Recent events had undoubtedly thrown a new complexion over the Lezaire case. Many new and strange facts had transpired since Gibbings had come to Straddlethorpe. It seemed his bounden and immediate duty to lay them all before his old master, with whom he had had no communication for some time past.

Beyond a short telegram that he had been detained in Thorpe-shire, and which—being, as we are aware, no scholar—he had dictated to a postal clerk, he had as yet given no account of his movements. He intended to do so by word of mouth the first chance he got of slipping up to town. Caution was more than ever necessary now, as well as despatch. So pleading as an excuse a summons to the Army Pension Office, he got a day's leave from Sir Hubert and took the first train to town.

He reached Harrop's Green early in the forenoon, and found the house topsy-turvy, littered and half dismantled, with every indication of another move.

The Colonel was at the ticket-office, but Mrs. St. Evelyn quickly explained that they were on the point of leaving England, all of them, for a long time, perhaps for good and all. To better themselves? Why, of course—the Colonel had got an excellent situation; and sitting there amidst the packing-cases, Rachel gleefully told Gibbings all about it.

There had been little change with the St. Evelyns since we left them until within the last few weeks, when all at once, as so often happens in life, an entirely new prospect had opened before them quite suddenly and unawares.

It was all through Mr. Carrington Lomas, who, since their first meeting, had never ceased to show a friendly interest in them all. He had become almost an old friend, and he proved it by those little attentions the rich can give, and the poor, however proud, accept, without patronage on the one side and loss of self-respect upon the other.

Mrs. St. Evelyn never wanted now for flowers, the children for fruit, nor St. Evelyn himself for the savory food he still loved as in happier days; a fine salmon, a box of grouse straight from the moors, plump partridges, or a Michaelmas goose, were gifts he still thoroughly appreciated.

"Upon my soul," he said, "I ought to call and thank him. He's monstrous kind, this Mr. Lomas."

"Do, dearest, the first day you are off duty. If you only leave a card."

"That would look pretentious in my present position. No, I will try and find him at home. I am genuinely obliged to him, and should like to say so in many words."

The call was made, the visit presently returned. The old gentleman, who, though brusque and sharp-spoken, was clearly a kindly philanthropic soul, pressed the St. Evelyns to bring their children for a run in his garden.

"Whenever and as often as you please," he repeated more than once, and they took him at his word.

It was on one of these happy afternoons—most pleasant perhaps to the country-bred Rachel, who in her dingy London home ever pined for the green turf and shady woods of Straddlethorpe—that Mr. Lomas took St. Evelyn aside, and rather bluntly, but with the heightened color of a shy man approaching a delicate subject, said—

"Why do you stop on at Harrop's Green, Colonel? The place isn't half good enough for you."

"Beggars must not be choosers, Mr. Lomas. It gives us bread and that's something. Besides, where am I to get anything better? Prejudice is strong against a man like me, after what I've been through."

"Stuff and nonsense! That's rather in your favor. I think you were very hardly used."

"You know the facts? You have followed the case?" asked St. Evelyn, brightening at the sympathy shown.

"Certainly. I made it my business some time ago, in fact as soon as I found out—I mean, as soon as I knew exactly who you were. But I have a particular reason in asking you whether you are wedded to the service of the North-Eastern Extension Railway Company and the ticket-office at Harrop's Green."

"Perhaps you mean to offer me something better?" said St. Evelyn with a pleasant laugh.

"Well, that's about it. The only point is whether you care to go abroad."

"St. Evelyn's face fell, and with a gesture of disappointment he pointed to his children tumbling about at their mother's feet on the lawn.

"They could go with you, if that's all. It's not a bad climate—on the contrary, and just the country for the growing family of, pardon me, a poor man."

"I am deeply grateful to you for your kindness, Mr. Lomas, and were I alone in the world would unhesitatingly accept your offer at once, in the hearty spirit in which it is made. But you will understand why I wish first to know more."

"You have every right to know—I will tell you in half-a-dozen words. I have some large works in Nova Scotia, mines more exactly, coal mines, but they are not underground. There is a large

output, and we employ a number of hands. It is a long way off, and I am not satisfied with the returns. A closer supervision, a stricter management, exercised by some one accustomed to command and therefore determined to be obeyed, is, I think, indispensable. You are just the sort of man I want. Will you go out as manager for me?"

St. Evelyn put out his hand, saying frankly and without hesitation—

"Yes, of course I will go, and as soon as you please."

"Wait, wait; let me tell you something more of the place, of the salary, and so forth. I must indeed," he went on, seeing the Colonel would have interrupted him; "it's only business. Two thousand dollars a-year—that's four hundred pounds,—with house and garden, coals free—they're cheap enough there—and a prospective *pro rata* increase according as you increase the returns. Will that suit you?"

"My dear Mr. Lomas, don't say another word. I'm your man, and would be for half the money. Here, Rachel, Rachel! come over and hear the good news."

There were tears of gratitude in the gentle wife's eyes when she heard Mr. Lomas's liberal offer, so kindly and thoughtfully made.

"You have been a true friend to us, Mr. Lomas—far kinder, indeed, than some nearer and——"

She paused, hesitating to reproach her mother.

"And dearer. Not quite that, Rachel," her husband added for her. "There is not one spark of affection left in Lady Lezaire."

"Hush, Ferdinand, please." Sweet Rachel would not allow another word. "But our gratitude to you is sincere and very deep, Mr. Lomas. How shall we repay you?"

"The obligation is on my side. Colonel St. Evelyn is just the person I want."

"He is a first-rate man of business really," said the little woman bravely, and with such energy that both the gentlemen laughed, "and he will serve you as honestly and faithfully as your great, great kindness deserves. It is the very least return we can make."

"I promise that upon my honor. I can say no more," added St. Evelyn, with characteristic abruptness. "When would you like me to go out?"

"When would it suit you? I am rather anxious, I must confess, to make the change. I do not wish to press you, of course, but the winter begins early there, and——"

"An old soldier is always in marching order. My heavy baggage is light enough nowadays, even with these *impedimenta*," and he looked laughingly at his wife and the children now clinging to her dress.

"I will secure your passages forthwith—for, say, this day month. And you will, of course, require an advance—of what? Half-a-year's salary—will that do? To be repaid by instalments."

"We could not possibly accept so much," began Rachel, falteringly.

"Why, you have warm clothing to lay in—furs, blankets, all sorts of supplies. It shall be sent you to-morrow—or better, Colonel, you shall draw on me for the amount you require."

That was a happy evening—the happiest they had spent in Harrop's Green since they came to live there,—the happiest almost since the days at Trouville, now so long, long ago.

"I shall not be sorry to leave England for good and all," said St. Evelyn, cheerfully.

"Nor I," echoed Rachel, but with less assurance. "We will make a new home for ourselves, a new life out there. There is nothing here to regret, no one——"

Again she hesitated, thinking sadly of her mother, still bitter and estranged, whom probably she would never see again.

"No one—but Gibbings. But he must come out to us. We shall be sure to find him a good place. There are plenty in these new lands, and he is just the man to prosper there."

These were the very words Mrs. St. Evelyn repeated to the trusty man-servant when she had told him all the story; and the Colonel coming in just then, added his entreaties that Gibbings should join them in Nova Scotia.

"I can be of more use, I take it, at home, as I think you'll agree with me when I tell you what's turned up at Straddlethorpe."

And he proceeded to recount his recent adventures at the Hall. His news was stranger and even more startling than that of the St. Evelyn's; and when he had described all he had seen and heard, ending with the discovery of the Inverness, a very animated discussion followed, to the exclusion of every other topic.

"It was hidden, of course," said the Colonel. "But why there, and by whom?"

"Of course it was done on purpose," said Gibbings. "It's disappearance was part of the plot against you, Colonel."

"Implying that it had been made away with," went on Mrs. St. Evelyn, bringing a woman's quick wits to bear upon the question. "But that was a later thought, I expect. It was of course abstracted in the first instance to be used as a disguise."

"In personating me, in fact," said the Colonel.

"And it was so used: we have the chemist's evidence for that. No doubt the person who bought the arsenic wore your Inverness, Ferdinand."

"That's as clear as noonday. The next point is to discover the person."

"It was some one at the Hall."

"Or some one at the Hall was in it. How else could the Inverness be abstracted?"

"Hubert Podifat," suggested the Colonel, quickly.

"Wicked wretch! Could he have killed dear Carysfort, for whom he expressed such ardent affection? Oh no—impossible! And for other reasons."

"I should like to hear them," said the Colonel. "Who benefited most by Carysfort's death?"

"That could not have affected Hubert's succession. He would still have succeeded, had Cary 'ort been alive, directly the papers—papa's papers, I mean—had been found."

"And he had nothing to do with the finding of them," said Gibbings. "It was the housekeeper, wasn't it—Mrs. Leleu?"

"Mrs. Leleu!" cried Mrs. St. Evelyn, catching at the words. "An evil woman: I never liked her face. And what is this you say, Gibbings, of the power she seems to wield over Podifat?"

Mrs. St. Evelyn would never have conceded the name of Lezaire to the present holder of the title.

"It certainly brings Mrs. Leleu into the business, but how or why I cannot for the life of me see," said the Colonel, rather bewildered.

"If you did, dearest, the whole mystery would be unravelled; and we rustn't expect that at one stroke."

"What has become of Mrs. Leleu?" asked the Colonel.

"She is living at Bulkeley Wells, or was," said Gibbings. "I saw a letter addressed to her there."

"Mamma is going on there this week from Beachborough, where she has spent the summer. Frisby, her maid, wrote me word."

"Perhaps your mother will keep her eye on Mrs. Leleu, just to oblige us," said the Colonel, sarcastically. "Not that she has ever done much in that way."

"I was thinking I'd run over to Bulkeley Wells now and again," said Gibbings. "It's no great distance from Straddlethorpe. If my lady's there, old Podifat will perhaps turn up too, and I'd like to know what he's got to say to her."

"Ask Lady Lezaire herself, she'll be sure to tell you," laughed St. Evelyn. "If anything, she's as fond of you as she is of me."

CHAPTER XLIX.

BULKELEY WELLS.

BULKELEY WELLS is a health-resort on the edge of the Thorpeshire wolds. It lies on the northern bank of the Straddle, a picturesque hamlet lying low in a deep sinuous valley, well sheltered from wintry winds. The climate is unusually mild for England, the air pure and bracing—thanks to the elevation—while the discovery of certain mineral waters of supposed wondrous efficacy have added greatly to the attractions of the place.

In spite of its natural advantages, the village is only a village still, with a single street of stone-built but unpretending cottages with moss-grown roofs, an ancient parish church, and half-a-dozen shops in the market square. One of these is a confectioner's, which provides "meat" and "sweet" teas for the crowds that come in van-loads from the eastern end of Thorpeshire, and which would

drive a roaring trade but for the public-house on the other side of the way.

Local enterprise, anxious to encourage visitors of a better class, backed up by local capital, has endowed Bulkeley Wells with a few houses of a better sort—villas, standing single or semi-detached, with gardens ending on the shady walk which margins the river. But the new hotel is the great attraction at Bulkeley Wells, an imposing, not to say pretentious edifice, standing high upon the hill-side, and appropriately styled the Palatial. The house stands in extensive grounds of its own, with lodge gates, a long carriage-drive, shrubberies, plantations, and a broad expanse of ornamental water. The external aspect is that of a country mansion; inside, the gorgeous decoration, the profusion of cheap gilding and showy upholstery, are rather those of a French restaurant or a foreign casino.

But the outlay had been well expended. The Palatial Hotel is very popular with a large class in Thorpeshire, and beyond it. There is a great run on the house at certain seasons; every bedroom is engaged, every seat at the *table d'hôte* in the grand dining-hall, where the fare is of the most liberal Thorpeshire kind.

The hotel was quite full when Lady Lezaire arrived from Beachborough. It was late in the afternoon, and she had had a long journey. She had not secured rooms in advance, and the manager received her in a very offhand way.

"I'm sorry, but I don't see how I'm to help it, if the house is full. People must write beforehand," he said, brusquely.

Lady Lezaire grew very indignant at this reception in Thorpeshire, within easy reach of Straddlethorpe, where she had once reigned supreme, and turning to her maid, she cried—

"Don't have the baggage brought in, Frisby. We will go somewhere else."

"This is the only hotel at Bulkeley Wells," went on the manager, exulting.

"Very well, my lady," answered the maid, as she ran down the steps to the fly.

The manager had pricked up his ears at the address, and he quickly followed to inquire who "my lady" was. The name of Lezaire was familiar enough to him, and he came back at once, with altered, now obsequious manner.

"I could give your ladyship a room; it is a good room, although rather high, and perhaps change it for a better within a week."

"I shall not stay a week. I intend to take a house; but anything will do for to-night. I shall want a private sitting-room."

"That, my lady, is absolutely impossible. There isn't one vacant, not one. But you will not need it. We have magnificent public rooms, a special boudoir for the ladies, a ball-room; reading-room—ample accommodation."

"I don't choose to herd with the crowd," replied Lady Lezaire, loftily.

"At least you'll join the *table d'hôte* dinner at six, my lady, I hope," said the manager, insinuatingly.

"I think not. I will have tea in my own room."

"I am truly sorry, deeply grieved, indeed, my lady, but that is against the rules of the house. Nothing is served in the bedrooms except in case of illness."

"What a detestable hotel!" said Lady Lezaire. "Where is my room? I suppose I must stay—I can't help myself; but it shall only be for the night."

Lady Lezaire liked the place less than ever when, summoned by a noisy gong an hour or two later, she descended to the dining-room and after waiting humbly on the good pleasure of the head-waiter, was presently given a seat at a small side-table which accommodated the overflow from the main *table d'hôte*.

The moment she took her place, and before she had swallowed a mouthful of soup, her neighbors on either side began talking to her. The absence of ceremony was a chief feature of the Palatial Hotel. Acquaintances commenced always at the *table d'hôte*, and generally without introduction. Lady Lezaire did not know this, and she was in no humor to welcome such overtures. For a perfect stranger to address her was an unwarrantable liberty, which she would have at once resented by leaving the table, only she was hungry and wanted her dinner.

So when one neighbor, an oldish gentleman with a strong Thorpeshire accent, suggested pleasantly that she had just come—a fact she knew much better than he did,—and when her other neighbor, an over-dressed youth with an affected drawl, asked her whether she liked Bulkeley Wells, and meant to make a long stay, she merely put up her eye-glass and stared insolently at each of them, without making any reply.

She took refuge in her eye-glass from further annoyance, and sitting bolt-upright in her chair, with calm insolence proceeded to survey the strange company in which she found herself.

There must have been at least a hundred people dining. The largest number occupied a great table running down the centre of the room, on each side of which were smaller tables, such as that at which Lady Lezaire was seated, one in each of the four corners of the room. She had an excellent view of every one except those whose backs were to her.

"What a collection!" was her mental comment, as she noted the varieties of female costume, mostly an exaggerated burlesque of recent fashions, and the pretentious airs of the men, whose common looks were enhanced, not improved, by correct evening attire. "Where can they come from? Not Thorpeshire, surely. I never thought the county contained so many extraordinary people."

And not a face she knew! A Thorpeshire watering-place—the Thorpeshire accent running like a refrain through all the buzzing talk, yet not a soul she had ever met in the Thorpeshire that had been so long her home!

Stay!—that dark, sallow-faced woman with the coal-black hair and fierce dark eyes. No danger, surely? Again and again Lady Lezaire, with the vexed uncertainty of a short-sighted woman, examined through her eye-glass the features that seemed so familiar.

"I ought to know her, and I do, I am sure of it; but I cannot put a name to her. Who can it be?"

More and more worried and *intrigued* as positive recognition evaded her, she turned at length to one of the neighbors she had so cruelly snubbed, and tried to make amends.

She chose the younger; the elder, when first repulsed, had so concentrated his attention upon his plate that he was now purple and past conversation.

"The hotel is very full, apparently," said her ladyship, civilly. "Many nice people here?"

"Shoals."

"You know them all, I suppose?"

"All the best, certainly," he replied, gratified at the compliment.

"Can you tell me who that lady is near the top of the table on the far side—a dark woman, in black velvet and—"

"Where? There? Oh, yes! I know. A very charming person—a great traveller—knows the world, and has moved in the best society."

"Can you tell me her name?"

"Skene, Mrs. Marmaduke Skene, from London and New York. That is what is entered in the visitors' book."

"Mrs. Skene? Oh!" and Lady Lezaire dropped her eye-glass, having no further interest in the matter. She had never met or known a Mrs. Skene, and supposed she had been misled by this woman's resemblance to some one else.

The dinner was interminable. Course succeeded course and the guests did ample justice to all. Lady Lezaire grew bored and wearied long before it ended, and taking up her gloves, began her preparations for leaving the table.

"The sweets ain't 'arf done yet. There's a Bakewell pudding to come—better wait for it," muttered the old gentleman in a thick voice.

"You know there's to be music in the drawing-room after dinner," suggested the youth. "I suppose you want to secure a good place and a comfortable arm-chair. There's a great rush amongst the dowagers for the arm-chairs."

No woman likes to be called a dowager, even at eighty; and Lady Lezaire flattered herself she still looked young.

"Sir!" she said angrily, forgetting she had herself encouraged him to talk to her, "you are very impertinent. I am not going to the drawing-room, but to my own room. I prefer my own company to that of people I don't know."

So saying, she rose and left the room.

An hour later her maid found her yawning over a book, and

utterly bored with life. The prospect before her was dreary enough; she was quite alone in the world, with comparatively straitened means, after enjoying every luxury; she had no longer a home, no hearth, no family, no children of her own; the boy she had doted on dead, murdered, as was still her firm and unalterable conviction; her remaining child estranged from her, having thrown in her lot for ever with a double-dyed villain whom it was impossible to forgive.

"Frisby, you needn't unpack much," said Lady Lezaire; "I certainly shan't stay here, probably not over to-morrow. I think I shall leave England—go away south to the Riviera. I have friends at Cannes. Besides, one is more likely to meet gentlefolk out there than in these second-rate hotels at home."

"They ain't much, my lady, in this house," replied Frisby, with conviction.

"Have you seen any one you know?"

"Well, my lady, I have—the last person I'd have expected. Perked up and dressed up to the nines, holding her head high, and sitting at the best table the same as your ladyship! I never knew such impudence."

"Why, Frisby, you are getting quite warm. Who can it be?"

"That Mrs. Leleu, my lady, who was housekeeping at the Hall under your ladyship. Don't you remember her?"

"Of course; now I understand."

The puzzle of the familiar face seen at the dining-table was now solved. The woman she had recognized was no other than her old housekeeper, Mrs. Leleu.

"You are quite positive of this, Frisby. Have you spoken to her? Did she answer to her name?"

"Name indeed! she's dropped that. It's well, perhaps, she should. I seed her walking out with the rest of the fine folk from the dining-room, and I knew her directly; but I asked one of the waiters, just to make sure what she called herself. 'Mrs. Skene,' says he, 'Mrs. Marmaduke Skene.' That's not the right name, as you know, my lady; but I suppose she didn't want to be remembered as Mrs. Leleu. It's her, right enough. Is it likely I'd forget her, and we living together for three years at the Hall?"

No doubt remained in Lady Lezaire's mind that Mrs. Leleu and Mrs. Marmaduke Skene were one and the same person. The wish to conceal her identity and former line of life was sufficient explanation of the change of name.

"Have you spoken to her, Frisby? Do you think she saw you?"

"'Tisn't likely, my lady; I'd rather have nothing to say to her now."

"Better not, Frisby. The woman is in a false position, although that's no business of ours. I don't suppose she will claim acquaintance with you, and in any case, I shall leave the hotel to-morrow."

CHAPTER L.

MANY MEETINGS.

LADY LEZAIRE next morning refused positively to go down to the public breakfast, and pleading illness, was allowed to have what she wanted in her room. When she had finished it, and was so far dressed as to be independent of her maid's assistance, she despatched Frisby into the village to see whether any decent lodgings were to be procured. Having come to Bulkeley Wells, she wished to stay there, at least a few weeks, or until the winter season had begun upon the Riviera.

While she leisurely completed her toilet, the chambermaid came and told her that some one was asking for her down-stairs.

"Who is it? I expected no one. What name?"

It was a man looking something like a keeper or a coachman, the chambermaid answered. That was all she knew, except that he said he had come from Straddlethorpe, and that he was most anxious to see Lady Lezaire.

A woman's curiosity soon overcame any first hesitation in Lady Lezaire. She had had no direct communications with the Hall for many months, although old friends in the county sometimes corresponded with her. But their letters contained only general gossip; and while commenting upon Sir Hubert's behavior, gave no very precise details of what went on at Straddlethorpe.

Here was a chance of learning more exactly all that had happened since her exodus. This man was probably a servant out of place, some one she had known, who had followed her seeking a new character or her good word.

"If he chooses to wait for half an hour or so, I will see him. I shall not be down before that."

When Lady Lezaire left her room she was equipped in bonnet and cloak, meaning, if Frisby had returned, to go with the maid and see the lodgings. On descending to the hall she found the manager very solicitous about her health.

"Some one has been asking for me," she began, cutting short all enquiries.

"Yes, my lady. He was outside a minute or two ago, and no doubt is still waiting there." The manager opened the hall door, bowing low, and then accompanied Lady Lezaire to the bottom of the entrance-stairs.

No man was visible.

"Oh, well, if he didn't choose to wait, that's his affair," said Lady Lezaire. "You can tell my maid when she returns that she will find me somewhere in the grounds. They seem nicely laid out," she added graciously.

"Oh, my lady, you are too good! But we take immense pains. I hope you will inspect them thoroughly. I should like to accompany you, but just at this moment——"

"Thank you, don't apologize. I shall find my way, no doubt." And she sauntered slowly across a piece of level lawn that stretched almost uninterruptedly from the front of the house towards a fringe of shrubbery that ended the grounds.

On her way she passed a summer-house nestling among the yellowing leafage, placed so as to command the best view of the beautiful valley.

There were people in the summer-house. She heard voices raised high in altercation, and was passing quickly on, having no desire to intrude upon the quarrels of others, when she was pulled up short by hearing her own name.

"Lady Lezaire, you fool! There's no Lady Lezaire here." It was Mrs. Leleu's voice.

"You're a liar!" A coarse oath strengthened the rude rejoinder.

"I tracked her here from Beachborough, tracked her to the station last night, and saw the flyman that drove her to this hotel."

"Well, let's say she is here. What is it you want with her?"

"I've got something to tell her, some information she will be glad enough to buy."

"Not about —— you wouldn't be such a blind, blundering fool. It would ruin everything—— spoil the whole game."

"I'll do it, I swear I will, unless I'm allowed to cut in."

"You shall have your share. Who wants to prevent you?"

"He does. Thinks he can keep it all to himself—so do you. But you shan't."

"You'd have blown the whole gaff if you'd stayed on at Stradde-thorpe playing the old games. Why couldn't you drop it and live decently? Look at me."

"It's ten years since I fingered a trigger or brought down a bird. The free air out on the moors made me mad. You forget I was brought up in the woods where I could kill all I could come up with. Here they cop yer for carrying a gun. Over yonder now ——"

"Why don't you go back there? It would suit you far better. You could live like a gentleman, and shoot what you chose."

"Ay; wild geese and cariboo, elk and birch partridges; and fish the lake-runs for salmon-trout; and go moose-calling on winter's nights with Joe MicMac or Caughnawaga Bill."

"Well, why not? Will you go?"

"How much?" answered the other after a lengthened pause, during which Lady Lezaire heard every pulsation of her wildly beating heart; "I must know that first. I might perhaps make better terms with my lady."

"You'll drop that line altogether if you're wise. It'll be far better for you and for her."

The menace conveyed by the last few words made the listener's blood run cold.

"I'm not afraid of you, my dearie; you daren't do me no harm. As for m' lady, when I've done with her, she may look out for herself."

"She'd better not play into your hands or come across my path."

Lady Lezaire, thoroughly terrified, turned to leave the spot. What would happen to her, what would this terrible woman do to her, if she was caught outside the summer-house? But it was all so strange, so deeply interesting. She must hear more, if only a dozen words more: there were perhaps still stranger things to come.

"Oh, there ain't much tender-heartedness about you, my dearie! You know what you wants, and you manage to get it, spite of all obstacles in the way." The man laughed in cynical admiration.

"I swore to do it some day," she replied, darkly.

"I know that; but I never thought you would or could. That's what beats me—how did you work it?"

"That's my affair. You leave it alone."

"All so pat, too—so perfect and complete. I was nonplussed, hoccusSED, you might have said—I was so took aback when I got home to the Hall and found young Hubert there in the old man's place."

"Look here, Jacob, I've told you to leave all that alone. 'Tain't no business of yours, except to pick up what's coming to you, and it's a fair share if you only take it the right way. When will you leave England?"

"By the end of the week, if you make it worth my while."

"You haven't said how much yet."

"I want a hundred down, and three hundred a-year."

"It's a bargain, then. I'll write to Hubert and settle it all. But you must clear out of here at once. Go down to Liverpool and stay there till you sail."

"All right, my sweetie. You give us the dollars, or some of them."

"You shall have twenty pounds down, only I must first go back to the hotel. But make yourself scarce now. I can't be seen talking to you, and we have been together long enough in here. I'll meet you in half an hour at the confectioner's; you can't miss it, just opposite the public-house in the market square. Now go: you first, I'll follow."

When old Podifat, whom the reader will have recognized, left the summer-house, Lady Lezaire had already disappeared. She had some time previously interpreted Mrs. Leleu's words as implying that the interview was all but ended, and a real sense of impending danger had forced her to fly.

She breathed more freely when once more within the privacy of her own bedroom. Although still dazed and bewildered, she could think a little more calmly over all she had heard. They were very strange and very startling, these new facts sprung upon her so suddenly, so unexpectedly, losing nothing from their incompleteness and the vague mystery that surrounded them.

Who was this man who had come to see her, Lady Lezaire, but whom Mrs. Leleu had kept away? Who, after all, was Mrs. Leleu, and what was the meaning of her intimate, perhaps culpable, acquaintance with her visitor?

While still pondering, doubtful and perturbed, Frisby returned, seemingly full of importance, as from a mission successfully discharged.

"Have you found suitable rooms?" asked Lady Lezaire. "I should like to move this very afternoon."

"They ain't much, my lady—not at all much—but they might serve. But it isn't only that. Have you seen any one from Straddle-thorpe?"

"No," faltered Lady Lezaire. "Have you?"

"He said he wanted to speak to your ladyship, and that he was coming here a-purpose. But I said as how I was sure you'd never see him."

"Of course I shall not see him. How dare he intrude! Who is he? What does he want?"

There was evident vacillation in the last remark. Lady Lezaire thought her maid was speaking of the man who had been with Mrs. Leleu, and hoped much from the answer towards unravelling the riddle.

"He's at the Hall again—in service. You'd never have believed it, my lady. The last man to be taken on."

"Who is it, woman? Will you speak plain?"

"Mr. Gibbings, as was the Colonel's own man. He's here at the Wells. I met him in the market square getting out of one of the breaks from Market Reepham."

"And he wants to see me?"

"Most particular, my lady, and as soon as convenient; that was the message he sent with his duty. I told him he was wasting his breath."

"Was that all? Did he give you no idea of what it was all about, or say why he was so pressing?"

"Well, my lady, he was mysterious-like, but he made so bold as to int it'd be the worse for you if you didn't see him; said you'd be sorry for it some day."

"Where is the man? Here in the hotel?"

"No, my lady, he is waiting for his answer by the post-office. I said I'd go back in half an hour. He wouldn't come near the 'otel; said there was some one here he'd rather not see, or rather, who didn't wish to see him."

"Mrs. Leleu?" hazarded Lady Lezaire.

"It must have been her he was driving at," replied the lady's maid, gladly seizing the suggestion; "but he needn't have troubled himself. She's that hoity-toity and stuck up she wouldn't know him. She wouldn't know me when we met on the stairs half a minute ago."

"You are sure you made no mistake?"

"Mistake, my lady! Is it likely, after living three years in the same place? She was going to pass me by, but I ups and says to her, 'Lor' a mussy, you have become fine!' 'I don't know you,' says she. 'You orter,' says I, 'seeing as how we were fellow-

servants at Straddlethorpe Hall.' 'Meaning me?' says she. 'Then you're altogether in error, for I never was in that Hall, or any other Hall, and that's all about it.' But it was Mrs. Leleu fast enough, and I called out her right name after her, and asked her, 'Where's Mrs. Marmaduke Skene, Mrs. Leleu?' She was downright mad, my lady, I can tell you."

"Well, well, that's enough of Mrs. Leleu. About Gibbings now? He had better come to the new lodging later in the day. I suppose we can move in at once?"

"If it please you, my lady."

"Give me the address, then, and I will walk down to the house. You can pay the hotel bill and follow by-and-by with the baggage."

"But Gibbings, my lady, he will be waiting."

"I will take the post-office on my way, and speak to him as I pass."

CHAPTER LI.

FRESH SCENT.

THE Bulkeley Wells post-office, like the shops and the public-house, was in the market square. Indeed one of the windows of the Bulkeley Arms taproom commanded a view of the little stone forecourt in front of the post-office door, as well as the road that sloped down from the Palatial Hotel to the market square.

When Lady Lezaire came down the road she was under full observation from the Bulkeley Arms; and Gibbings, who was watching and waiting for the lady's-maid's answer, saw and recognized the mistress directly she hove in sight.

"Whew!" he whistled. "It is my lady herself. Is this a mere accident, or is she coming on purpose to meet me?"

Gibbings still waited, wondering more and more, as Lady Lezaire walked straight up to the little iron gate of the post office forecourt. There she halted, as if irresolute, and looked nervously around.

"By George! it's me she's after, or I am a Dutchman. I'll go out to her."

By the time Gibbings had paid his reckoning and crossed the pavement, Lady Lezaire had entered the forecourt. He just caught a glimpse of a dress disappearing through the inner door of the post-office.

"I'd better go after her. I can buy a postage-stamp, or ask what time the post goes out. Anything will do, and on the slightest encouragement I can make up to her."

Gibbings had been too intent on watching Lady Lezaire to notice a second female figure, which had followed her ladyship down the hill. He had disappeared inside the post office when the second figure came within nearer view,

It was Mrs. Leleu, otherwise Mrs. Marmaduke Skene, and she was on her way to the confectioner's where old Podifat, very much out of his element was gorging himself with new buns.

Mrs. Leleu, seating herself at the small, marble-topped table, and calling for a cup of tea, said at once in a low voice to Podifat—

" You were right about Lady Lezaire : she is here. I have just followed her down the hill."

" Right ! Of course I was. What call was there for me to tell lies ? I knowed she was here, because I wanted to know it : it was part of my game."

" But you're to throw up your hand now, remember. Here are the twenty pounds ; the balance shall be sent to you at Liverpool. I promise that for Hubert, and the yearly sum paid over as you prefer, as soon as you write from the other side. But that's all you get, understand."

" My lady, perhaps, 'll be more liberal."

" She can't afford it. We've got the whip hand of her there now, so you'd better accept our terms and leave her alone. But as I'm alive, here she is, making straight for this shop, and not alone either."

" Is that Lady Lezaire ? Blest if I'd a' known her again ! But ten years do make a difference in an old woman's looks. I'd hardly have known you either, my dear, if you hadn't spoke to me first."

" Dry up, Jacob, this is no time for magging. Suppose she comes straight in here and finds us together."

" What odds ? Can't we sit in a sweet-shop without asking her leave ?"

" You fool ! She's bound to recognize you."

" What do I care ! She ain't one of the police, and I ain't bound to report myself to her."

" Don't you see what I mean ? She will recognize me too, and as I came to the Hall long after you left, will wonder how we know each other ; this may arouse suspicions."

" Then make tracks through the back door. I shall hold my ground. I know that chap as is walking with her ; I met him up at the Hall."

" Why, that's Gibbings," said Mrs. Leleu, looking at him more closely. " When could you have met him at the Hall ? He left it a year ago, with his old master."

" He's come back again, then, with the new."

" Back ! How ? What brought him ? Never mind, you can tell me all that by-and-by. They are coming straight in here."

Mrs. Leleu rose hurriedly from her seat and stepped back a few paces towards the counter, hoping she might not be seen, unless, indeed, it was possible for her to escape altogether.

But the danger passed almost as quickly as it had arisen. Lady Lezaire and her companion did not enter the shop, but walked on.

" So Gibbings is back at the Hall," said Mrs. Leleu, resuming her seat and the thread of their conversation.

"That's so. I found him there. He's coachman or head groom to Hubie, and gallus good friends too."

"It looks queer, and I don't like it. Gibbings belonged always to the other side, and if he's in with Hubert, there's some reason for it, you bet. Only I'd like to know, and what brings him here with Lady Lezaire?"

"Perhaps you'd like me to ask him—only him and I are not friends. I was near putting a charge of buckshot into his mean carcass the last time I saw him."

"When was that? At the Hall?"

"Just there; when I had that last flare-up with Hubie he called for this chap to put me out."

"What! is he so thick with Hubert?"

"Thick? Thick as thieves. Always riding about together, or else Hubie's in the harness-room with him smoking, or some other game."

"And Hubert called him in to put you out, you say. D'ye guess this Gibbings heard anything that passed between you?"

"He might have; I can't swear. I was downright mad, and was talking pretty tall."

"Do you recollect at all what you were saying?"

Podifat shook his head.

"Mostly cursing, I expect, and threatening."

"To tell Lady Lezaire," said Mrs. Leleu, putting her hand on his arm; "was that it?"

"Like enough. How could you guess that?"

"Don't you see, you oaf? This Gibbings has come over to put my lady on her guard. That's what he's telling her now, you may be sure. How else could he get speech of her? She couldn't bear him—hated him worse than the Colonel; and now here they are as smooth and pleasant as you please. I don't like it."

"What can she do to yer? What are yer afraid of?"

Mrs. Leleu did not reply; she was lost in thought. But presently she got up from her seat, saying—

"It all depends on how much Gibbings knows, and what. Hubert may have let something out in drink—young sot! I always warned him against that; and if Gibbings is always with him, a chance word may have set him thinking. He's no fool, Gibbings."

"What do you mean to do, sis? Come along with me across the pond."

"Not yet, Jacob; I must see first what they're after. It may be a false alarm. I'll keep my eye on her ladyship, if I can do so unobserved; it won't be easy, as by this time she knows I'm here. Anyway, you get out. Go straight down to Liverpool, and send me a line from there."

Let us now follow Gibbings, who had found no difficulty in addressing Lady Lezaire. She indeed received him with a cordiality that surprised him.

He began by briefly recounting all he had seen and heard at the

Hall, explaining why he had taken service there, and concluding with the strange discovery of the Inverness.

" You know, my lady, the truth's got to come out yet," he said stoutly. " No one's been near it so far, the law least of all. I want to put the Colonel right, for I'm fond of my old master, and luck's been rough on him. Now you, my lady, in spite of the verdict, think it was he as did it."

" No, no," interrupted Lady Lezaire, hastily; " you must not say that."

Her belief was greatly shaken by what she had overheard that morning.

" Perhaps you think it was me?" went on Gibbings, smiling grimly.

" I don't know what I thought, but now I'm certain there has been some terrible misunderstanding. There have been many victims—my poor dear boy, myself, the Colonel too—but why or wherefore, I cannot understand. I am too puzzled, too much bewildered, by what I have heard to-day."

" Might I make so bold as to ask your ladyship what that was, and who you heard it from?"

" I heard it by accident, from a man who came over from Strad-dlethorpe on purpose to see me."

" By accident," said Gibbings, rather puzzled. " The man was old Podifat, I suppose."

" Old Podifat? The man who once passed as Hubert's father, and who was, I think, sent to jail? Of course, it must have been he."

" And what did he tell you, my lady?"

" I did not see him myself, but I—I—I overheard him talking to a woman who was once in my service, but who is now staying here."

" Mrs. Leleu," added Gibbings, promptly. " Of course she's in the plot. Somehow I suspect that she was the prime mover, or had a large hand in it."

" I never suspected her till this morning, I must confess; but now I think very differently."

" What does your ladyship know about this Mrs. Leleu?"

" Not very much, but we ought soon to find out more."

" She was in your ladyship's service at the Hall for many years, I think. Where did she come from? You had a character with her, I suppose. We ought to be able to trace her through that."

" She came to me strongly recommended. I remember that perfectly, and it is possible I may have kept her character, but I am not sure, seeing how long it is ago, and the changes that have occurred since then. Perhaps Mr. Tinson can help me."

" Did they recommend her?" asked Gibbings, not sorry to have a sly slap at the lawyers."

" Oh, no; but they have a quantity of papers and letters of mine which I sent them on leaving the Hall. I will write to Mr. Tinson, or, better still, go to London at once. This ought to be followed up without delay."

"That's right, my lady. No one can do that better than yourself. If you will undertake the job, I will return to Straddlethorpe. But some one ought to keep an eye on Mrs. Le'eu."

"I'll arrange all that with Mr. Tinson."

"But if your ladyship is going to London, there's some one else besides Mr. Tinson I hope you'll see."

Gibbings spoke out boldly, knowing how Mrs. St. Evelyn grieved at the estrangement of her mother.

"Whom do you mean?" asked Lady Lezaire, stiffly but not angrily. She was perfectly well aware, but did not resent the presumption as she would have done a few hours before.

"It's your last chance of seeing them all, my lady," replied Gibbings, feeling certain he was understood.

"Why, what has happened? Where are they going?"

"Out of England, on foreign service—I mean to one of the colonies; and there's no saying when they'll come home—unless—"

"I had not heard a word of this. Where are they living? Tell me more directly."

Gibbings soon satisfied Lady Lezaire, and in a few words informed her of the impending change in the St. Evelyn's prospects and future life.

"Perhaps they will not care to receive me," said Lady Lezaire doubtfully, pleading any excuse.

"The mistress—I mean Mrs. St. Evelyn, of course, for she'll always be mistress to me—is pining to see your ladyship, I know that—now more than ever; and the wide seas will so soon divide you. And there's the children, my lady—three beauties, round, and sound, and cheery: it'd do your heart good to see them too."

"You seem very much attached to the family. Your devotion, it seems, was not for the Colonel alone."

"I'm getting an old man, my lady, and a lone man, and the Colonel's family, himself, and the mistress, and the little chicks, are much the same as my own, and all the family, I take it, I shall ever have."

His words went home to Lady Lezaire. Was not she lonely too and growing old, and might she not take to her heart these her own flesh and blood if she chose?

"I will call at Harrop's Green as soon as I possibly can," she said, quite humbly. She had learnt a lesson from this faithful servant.

CHAPTER LII.

Celerity and Discretion.

As they talked together, Lady Lezaire and Gibbings had gradually climbed the hilly path towards the hotel. But as they reached the lodge gates the latter said—

"I can't go in, my lady. I don't want to meet that woman face to face."

"I don't see why you should. And really I need not keep you. It will be better for you to go back at once to Market Reepham. Go to the police office and tell them all you have told me. They will send some one then to watch Mrs. Leleu."

"That's right, my lady. She ought to be watched, and they'll be the people to do it. And I think I'll stay on at the Hall; there's no knowing what else may turn up."

"Perhaps they won't let you. But if you leave it, let me know your address. Write to me at Mr. Tinson's; they will always know where I am. Good day now. But stay"—she put her hand in her pocket and produced her purse—"you have given much time and trouble to this matter; I hope you will accept—"

"No, no, my lady, don't think of that. I've been only doing my duty, or what's as good nowadays, and I don't want to be paid for that. I shall be more than paid by-and-by, I hope, when I see my old master righted; and that will come, I'll bet anything, even to my shirt. Good day, my lady."

Gibbings touched his hat civilly and returned to the village.

When Lady Lezaire re-entered the hotel, she found Frisby waiting for her in the hall with her bonnet on, encumbered with wraps and umbrellas, and having the usual appearance of a lady's-maid on her travels.

"I've paid the bill, my lady; the baggage is all down, and is being put on the fly, which will be round directly."

"Tell me, Frisby," said Lady Lezaire, interrupting her—"did you definitely take the rooms?"

"Oh no, my lady; it was only subject to your liking them."

"Well, then, I shall not want them. I am obliged to go to London by the first good train. Perhaps you can tell me"—she turned to the manager, who stood at the door of his office—"what trains there are to London."

"One of the best in the day is the 12.45, my lady, which gets into London soon after four. Sorry to think you are leaving us."

"I am called away suddenly," replied Lady Lezaire, briefly. "You can send on letters to Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"I trust, my lady, that another time we shall be better able to please you. If only you would be so good as to give us a little notice, the very best rooms in the house would be reserved. You will, I hope, understand—"

The appearance of the fly cut short the manager's apologies; and Lady Lezaire, taking her seat, bade Frisby tell the flyman to take the lodgings on the way to the station. There was not much time to spare, but Lady Lezaire caught the 12.45 express as she wished.

Just about the time the train was running out of Bulkeley Wells station, Mrs. Leleu returned to the Palatial Hotel. She was on very friendly terms with the manager, and seeing him seated at his office desk, just inside the hall, did not hesitate to look in for a moment and exchange a few words.

She soon brought the conversation to the hotel, and the business it was doing.

"More arrivals last night, Mr. Laslett. I wonder where you could put them all, and no departures."

"Oh, pardon me, Mrs. Skene; a lady left this morning whom I should gladly have kept for the season. But we were too crowded for her. A lady of title."

"Indeed?" asked Mrs. Leleu, suddenly interested. "Some great personage? Does she belong to the county?"

"Well, she did. You must have heard of her or the family. There has been great talk of the Lezaire of Straddlethorpe."

"Has Lady Lezaire left, then? I heard she had arrived last night. Was she dissatisfied with the hotel? She must have been hard to please."

"She said she was unexpectedly called away—summoned to London. That may or may not have been the reason. All I know is that she has gone up by the 12.45 express."

"To London," said Mrs. Leleu to herself, as she walked away to her own room; and suddenly—"Why, it must be on account of something she's heard, from Gibbings, of course, this very morning. She has given me the slip, but not altogether. I will have her followed from the station, and for the next few days. That may give me some idea of her game."

"But who's to do it? Whom could I trust? No one in London I know. But that's so much the better. Mrs. Skene may have reasons, which she need not explain, for doing what Mrs. Leleu wouldn't dare. If I only had the address of some inquiry office. Where shall I get it?"

"I suppose Mr. Laslett has a London directory; but I'd rather not ask him, it might be remembered. They advertise sometimes, these people; I've seen it in the papers. We get them all here, and I'll just run my eye through the 'Times' and the rest."

A very short search rewarded her efforts. There, in a prominent place on the outer sheet, were the names and addresses of several of those peculiar firms and institutions, which are such a strange evidence of the secret intrigues constantly in progress in modern society.

"**H**AGGIE & HORRY, VINCENT SQUARE. Celerity and Discretion. Missing Friends traced. Persons watched for Divorces, &c. Apply, write, wire, or telephone."

"That'll do for me. Let's see, it's nearly one o'clock. The 12.45 is due"—she consulted a time-table—"is due at 4.30. I will wire to this people, but not from Bulkeley Wells. Jacob has not left yet. He shall drive to Ditchingham, and hand in the message there."

Then, seating herself at a writing-table, she indited the following—

"Haggie and Horry, Vincent Square, London. Watch lady

arriving with her maid by 4.30 mail Euston. Lady tall, black costume; maid also in black, stout, red hair. Report movements to day, and day by day till further instructions. Will receive cheque for expenses by first post to-morrow, and full address."

This telegram was duly despatched by Podifat, upon whom its vital importance was strongly impressed; and Mrs. Leleu patiently waited the result.

Let us now follow Lady Lezaire to London. On arrival she drove to a private hotel near Piccadilly. The town house of the Lezaires in Connaught Place was no longer available, even if she had cared to be under obligations to Sir Hubert Lezaire. Since the change in ownership, the London had been let on a long lease.

It was too late that evening to go to Lincoln's Inn Fields; besides, Lady Lezaire was tired. It had been a long and exciting day, full of varying emotions, and ending with a fatiguing journey to town.

Next morning, having prepared Mr. Tinson for her visit by a letter sent overnight, she drove in a hired brougham, provided by the hotel, with the conventional grey horse and the usual commonplace coachman, to the lawyer's office, and was at once shown into his private room.

"Lady Lezaire in London in October! You are the last person I expected to see."

"Strange things have happened, Mr. Tinson, or rather I have come upon some curious information, and want more."

Then she proceeded to detail all she had heard and seen within the last twenty-four hours.

"If there had been nothing more than the gossip of this Gibbings," began Mr. Tinson, with professional caution, "I shouldn't think much of it at all."

"But there is the story of the Inverness."

"That is only doubtful evidence still. Any one might have put it there—Gibbings himself, now he's back at the Hall. He has had full run of the place, remember."

"But it is not only what Gibbings says. I heard enough with my own ears."

"Perfectly. That's what I was coming to. There's enough to start a very ingenious story. But we lawyers are seldom imaginative, we like to work with solid facts. Now, so far, how much do we know?"

He briefly recapitulated the case as it then stood.

"A man of indifferent character, an old convict, in fact, comes to see you, but is intercepted by a woman who seem intimately acquainted with him.

"He was at Straddletorpe once, but years ago, long before this woman was there. Hence their acquaintance must be antecedent to her residence at Straddletorpe. Why has he come to see you? Not so much to oblige you as to intimidate some one else. Who is this other person?

"Sir Hubert Lezaire. The man has quarrelled with Sir Hubert,

and threatens to reveal something to you—we don't know exactly what—but is prevented by this woman, who buys his silence on Sir Hubert's behalf. Clearly she also knows what was to be revealed, and the value of the secret.

"What is it? There is something between the three; but what? How are we to arrive at it? Let us take up each of the three individuals in turn, and see whether they will help us.

"Sir Hubert we know all about now. His whole life was accounted for at the time of the ejectment suit. Then Podifat, the old man, is known to us at least for the last dozen years. He was gamekeeper at the hall, and was sent to penal servitude for ten years in 1872, a sentence which has barely expired. He was safely out of the way when all these changes occurred at Straddlethorpe, and whatever secret he possesses must refer to something that happened long ago, although it may have a direct bearing on what has since occurred.

"Now as to the third person, Mrs. Leleu. Who and what was she? She was resident at the Hall before and during the changes. Had she any hand in them? What part could she play?"

"Surely you don't suspect her of—"

"I am dealing with facts, Lady Lezaire, not suspicions. But it is a fact, I think, that Mrs. Leleu was an inmate of the Hall at the time of your son's death, free to come and go as she pleased, with access to poor Carysfort's bedroom. She was alone nursing him, if I remember right, during his last illness."

"I had never thought of her," said Lady Lezaire, much agitated. "But why? What possible reason could she have—"

"We must not let imagination run away with us. Let us stick to facts; those we have may bring us to others. Now, what exactly do you know of Mrs. Leleu? You engaged her; how? Where did she come from? Some other lady's house, I presume, with a character."

"It is to settle that that I have come here this morning, Mr. Tinson. I can't remember exactly how I engaged her; but I made a memorandum at the time, I am sure, and it is amongst my papers — those I sent you when I left the Hall."

"Yes, we have your box. Shall I get it in for you?"

After half an hour's search Lady Lezaire said—

"This is the only record I can find. In my diary for 1875 I see—the new housekeeper has come: a very excellent character!"

"And that is all? You don't say who gave the character, or whether it was a personal one. I thought you ladies preferred the latter."

"As a rule, yes. But I remember now. This Mrs. Leleu came herself to the Hall, hearing I wanted a housekeeper, bringing her characters with her. They were from London, and I did not feel equal to going up on purpose about them. There were two or three, two certainly, both excellent and from ladies of position."

"Did you verify them, or write to the ladies?"

"I hardly think so. I was out of spirits, ill. It was only a year after I had lost Sir Percy. The household affairs were too much for me. I wanted an active, intelligent woman, and this Mrs. Leleu seemed so likely to suit me that I took her on trial, I remember now, and was glad to keep her after the first month."

"You don't even remember the names of those ladies of position, or where they lived?"

"One I know was a Mrs. Morley Tufnell; the other, I think, Lady Caroline Spatcher."

"I should suggest you seeing them both, or I will write to them, if they are to be found. That is the first business. You had better leave it to me."

Mr. Tinson took up a speaking-tube by the side of his desk communicating with a confidential clerk. Only portions of his instructions were audible or intelligible as the tube went alternately from his mouth to his ear.

"Tufnell—do you hear? and Lady Caroline—

"Yes, Spatcher. Quite so—only look—

"Try the directories first, or telephone to Lord Truro's agency."

The confidential clerk presently came in in person. A heavily built, high-shouldered man, with a ponderous manner and hesitating speech, that were nevertheless allied to brilliant deep-set eyes that betokened an acute understanding.

He gave Mr. Tinson a slip of paper, on which was written—nothing was said aloud in this well-managed office before a third person, even a client:

"Lady Caroline Spatcher, third daughter of the fifth Earl of Audley, married Andrew Spatcher 1853, deceased 1882.

"Mrs. Morley Tufnell, 25 Chesterfield Street, Mayfair, been there seventeen years."

Mr. Tinson looked up and nodded his head to the confidential clerk, who at once withdrew.

"Mrs. Morley Tufnell is your only chance, Lady Lezaire, as you see. If you like I will accompany you to her."

"Let us go at once."

A hansom followed the brougham with its grey horses to Mayfair, but discreetly stopped short of Chesterfield Street. Its occupant, however, having discharged it, strolled up the opposite side of the street and took the number of the house at which Lady Lezaire and Mr. Tinson was calling. At the top he crossed, and returning on the other side, passed the brougham just as the visitors were leaving the house.

"You could have hardly expected to find her," Mr. Tinson was saying. "No one is in town just now."

"No," Lady Lezaire had replied; "but it only makes a little longer journey. I shall go on to Brighton now; we have her address. Can you come too?"

"Perfectly," said Mr. Tinson, adding to the coachman, "Drive to Victoria; Brighton line."

They were resolved to run Mrs. Morley Tufnell down. She had a furnished house for the autumn months at Brighton, in Regency Square, where she received them that same afternoon. A middle-aged but still comely woman, somewhat abrupt of speech, and with the self-reliant, self-possessed air of a person who could take care of herself, and had done so for years.

"Don't apologize," she said. "About a servant? Not one of mine?"

"It must be seven years since she was in your service."

"More than that. I seldom if ever change. What was her name?"

"Mrs. Leleu. She was housekeeper to you ——"

"Oh dear, no; quite a mistake. Never had a housekeeper. Wouldn't. Only in the way. I look after my house myself."

"But she brought a written character from you, from 25 Chesterfield Street, Mayfair."

"That is my house; I have lived there for years. But I never knew Mrs. Leleu. Certainly I gave her no written character. I don't like giving characters to servants direct."

"Are we to understand, then," put in Mr. Tinson, with the suave impressive manner of the family lawyer, "that the story is a fabrication? You will forgive us, but this is a matter of deep importance. This is Lady Lezaire; I am her solicitor, Mr. Tinson, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. We are making inquiries that may have very vital issue."

"I'm sure I am very glad to oblige in any way, but I can only repeat what I have said. No woman named Leleu was ever in my service. I never heard of her. I don't know her from Adam, or rather from Eve."

"Then the character must have been forged."

"Undoubtedly, if it was given in my name."

With many apologies, which Mrs. Tufnell curtly acknowledged, Lady Lezaire rose, and the interview ended.

As they left the house, the same man who had watched them in 25 Chesterfield Street was asking the milkman the name of the lady now living at that house in Regency Square.

As the reader will have guessed, it was an agent of Haggie & Horry, who had obtained ample materials for a report to Mrs. Leleu.

CHAPTER LIII.

NOTICE TO QUIT.

RETURNING to town, Lady Lezaire and Mr. Tinson discussed the day's work, and then the whole subject in all its bearings.

"Of course it is now clear that Mrs. Leleu is not what she appears. She got into the Hall on false pretences, and probably in pursuit of some nefarious purpose."

"Probably, Mr. Tinson? Can you doubt it?"

"Well, no,—although it is not the first case of forged testimonials that I have come across. But her purpose—her purpose? To help Hubert forward."

"What did she know of Hubert before she came to the Hall?"

"She knew old Podifat; we are certain of that. Why not his putative son?"

"But how could she help him to succeed? The proofs were authentic—"

"They were so held in law, I admit, but—"

"And discovered quite accidentally—"

"Yes, but by her—don't forget that. It was she who first came upon the desk, you know."

"But the desk was really my husband's; the papers it contained, the confession, were all in his handwriting. That was sworn to, identified beyond doubt."

"I saw it, and believed it to be his. Could the whole thing be a forgery? Now we know Mrs. Leleu forged the characters she showed you, she was capable of fabricating other and more important documents."

"Heavens! Mr. Tinson, it is not possible. What a tissue of crimes such a suggestion implies!"

"I'm afraid my imagination is getting the better of me. Let me stick to facts. We must have more. A watch must be set at once on Mrs. Leleu."

"I thought of that. I sent Gibbings to tell the whole story to the police at Market Reepham."

"They will hardly act on any information or instructions from him. I will go down to Thorpeshire myself, Lady Lezaire, tomorrow—indeed I had better start to-night. This woman must not be lost sight of for a moment now."

As the shrewd lawyer supposed, the police had not paid much attention to Gibbings, who had indeed taken Market Reepham on his way back to Straddlethorpe the very day he had seen Lady Lezaire. Earswick, who might have been interested in the fresh news, was not within call; the chief constable had left the office; and the senior officer present, wrapped up in his brief authority, was too lofty to listen to the confidences of a studgroom.

Gibbings did not get back to the Hall till evening, rather late. He was free to come and go much as he pleased, provided only Sir Hubert was out of the way, and that day the young baronet had gone to the other end of the county to a coursing match. He was to sleep away from the Hall, and next morning was to be met at Hazelgrove by his loader with dogs and guns, as there was a party to shoot the General's coverts.

Wednesday, therefore, the day which Lady Lezaire spent with Mr. Tinson, was uneventful at Straddlethorpe till the late afternoon, when Gibbings, returning from exercising Devilskin, Sir Hubert's favorite hunter, got a message to say that his master had returned and was asking for him.

Sir Hubert was in the dining-room when Gibbings went in.

"Where have you been all day?" the young fellow asked, looking black and gloomy. "You're never here when you're wanted. Always gallivanting about the country like a gentleman at large. Where have you been, I say?"

"Not far," answered Gibbings, coolly. "But any way I was doing my work. Devilskin hadn't been out of the stables for a couple of days or more, and I gave him a couple of hours walking exercise."

"You'd no right to take Devilskin out of the stables without asking my leave. You never do ask my leave for anything. You went to London last week."

"Yes; but I asked you first, Sir Hubert. It was about my pension, you know."

"Pension!" cried the baronet, with an oath. "So you say; but how am I to know what you're up to. Some infernal robbery, I don't doubt. Anyway, you ought to be here earning the wages I give you, and attending to my work."

"What can I do for you now, Sir Hubert? I don't want to shirk my work."

"Look here," said Sir Hubert thickly, looking up at Gibbings with sullen bloodshot eyes; "have you ever heard of a Captain Sutton? What'd you take to shoot him or put him out of the way?"

Gibbings started, but answered quietly enough—"It's not quite in my line, Sir Hubert. I've shot people, perhaps, before now, but they were the Queen's enemies, and I was doing my duty."

"Well, this will be duty—to me, and I'll pay you for it. Anyway, if you won't do it, I shall."

Gibbings looked curiously at his master. Was this sober earnest, or some drunken joke? He evidently had been drinking; he was always in his cups as night drew on. Yet a strength of purpose, a really murderous intention, seemed to shine from his black hateful eyes.

"What Captain Sutton do you mean?" asked Gibbings. "Him in the Scotch Rifles? Or I think there's a captain of that name in the Bombardiers. Anyway, I mind a Captain Sutton on the General's staff some years back at Malta. Which of them will it be, Sir Hubert?"

"What do I know about your Scotch Rifles or other soldier's jaw! This Captain Sutton, curse him! is down here in Thorpeshire. I saw him t'other side of Hazelgrove this very day."

"Aha! after one of the young ladies, then. Not—surely he hasn't been poaching on your preserves, Sir Hubert?"

"That's just where I caught him. Listen here: I'll tell you the whole story. The ladies came out to the shooting lunch, all but the one girl I wanted to see. I was just sold. They said she was off color, had a sick headache or something, and had stayed at home. So I swore I wouldn't shoot after lunch, and gave the keeper my gun, saying I'd walk straight home. They all had their bit of a

joke; the General grinned, and so did the other girls, who offered to see me part of the way. But I gave them the go-by, meaning to look in at the Grove and ask after Etta, perhaps get a sight of her alone.

"Well, I was going across the gorse near Haverstock Spinney, not a mile from the house, when I thought I saw a bit of muslin—it was a bright pink bit, such as I knew Etta wore—shining through the thicket. I made after it, and soon caught it up—worse luck."

"'Twasn't Miss Etta, then?"

"No one else; but she had another man with her by her side—her lover. He had his arm around her, and—and"—the words seemed to choke him, while his face had grown purple—"he was kissing her, the scoundrel, the blackguard—" A long string of imprecations wound up the speech.

"Lucky you'd left your gun behind you," thought Gibbings, adding aloud, "Who was it, Sir Hubert? This Captain Sutton? Are you sure?"

"She called him Sam, dearest Sam. I guessed at once, for her mother and she had once had words about Sam. I heard them, and I was told all about him."

"Was that all you saw, Sir Hubert?"

"Wasn't it enough? But there was more. He was bidding her good-bye, as he was going a long way off—I wish he was going down to the bottomless pit—and she couldn't bear it, and kept kissing him and asking him to take her with him."

"You won't want to have anything more to say to her, surely?"

"I'd like to pay her off—to kill this chap, then bring her down and break her heart. And if you only help me, by George! Gibbings, you shall have anything you like to ask."

"Thank'e, Sir Hubert, you'll have to apply elsewhere. I'm ready to do my duty in the stable or about the house, or in any honest way; but I'm not quite the man for business of this sort, which is blackguard business at the best," Gibbings said at last, unable to contain himself.

"Then get out, clear out, hook it, before I make you!" roared Sir Hubert, rising in a violent passion, and staggering towards his man.

"Don't let me see your face again!"

Gibbings stood before his master for a minute or two, with quiet, resolute eyes, then as Sir Hubert blenched and fell back cowed, slowly walked out of the room.

They didn't meet again that night. Gibbings, as he turned in, was quite uncertain how to take the notice so roughly and unexpectedly given. Under ordinary circumstances he would have sent in his book and left the same morning; but there were reasons, as we know why he should hold on to his place at the Hall.

He was up early next morning and as usual in the stables superintending everything. By breakfast time he had seen the horses exercised and fed, the stables cleaned out, and had set the helpers their appointed tasks for the day.

It was nearly nine when, on his way from the stable-yard to the servant's ball, he met Purfrey, who said at once—

"Sir Hubert wants a brougham brought round in less than ten minutes."

"At this time of day?" asked Gibbings surprised. "What's taken him? I heard nothing last night about such an early start. Did he say where he was going?"

"No, Mr. Gibbings, he did not. Perhaps he'll tell you if you ask him. You're so mighty thick always."

"Come, come, Mr. Purfrey; 'tain't my fault. He likes my company, and I swear you can't miss his. He isn't so affable and pleasant-spoken as a rule; and as to his manners, why, you're his master there."

"Well, Mr. Gibbings, I've been in high families and served a many real gentlemen, and it's likely I've got something of their ways," said the butler, much mollified by Gibbings's adroit flattery. "I don't envy you Sir Hubert's company, and that's a fact, to-day least of all."

"Is he rougher than usual?" asked Gibbings, remembering the scene of the previous night.

"Fit to be tied, ever since I took him in his letters. There must have been some pepper in them, or else it was the telegram the boy brought in a few minutes ago."

"Aha! And then he ordered the brougham, eh?"

"Straight off, and said it'd better be round in less than no time, or he'd know the reason why. Wanted the bay mare too, you know."

"The speediest in the stables, I do know. Well, he's only got to say what he wants," and Gibbings, whistling coolly, turned on his heel. Regaining the stables he issued the necessary orders to an under-groom, and himself helped to harness and put the mare into the shafts.

The brougham was at the door, Gibbings standing by, when Sir Hubert appeared, his halting gait, bloodshot lack-lustre eyes, bearing testimony to the extent of the previous night's debauch. But the moment he caught sight of Gibbings his face flushed and his aspect changed. He became greatly excited, and began cursing Gibbings with great force and vigor.

"Didn't I tell you to clear out last night?" he said, seeming for once to remember, much to Gibbings's surprise, a kind of quarrel which was usually buried in his cups.

"I wasn't sure you meant it, Sir Hubert. Besides, you've got to settle with me," answered Gibbings, stoutly; "and I shall want to know the reason why you give me notice, unless I'm to take that——"

"I won't have none of your impudence," interrupted Sir Hubert. "You've been here a cursed sight too long, and ought never to have darkened my doors; but I know now what brought you. I was a dolt, a double-dyed jackass, to let you in here."

Gibbings seemed to see in this rage something more than his mere refusal to execute Sir Hubert's wild threats against Captain Sutton. Could the baronet have learnt what he was after? But how? Through whom? At any rate, the game was up, now that Sir Hubert was on his guard, and there was nothing to be gained by remaining at the Hall.

Nor was there any longer a reason for submitting to the overbearing insolence of Sir Hubert Lezaire.

"Get out of my way," went on Sir Hubert, pushing Gibbings aside as he still stood there with the handle of the brougham door in his hand.

"You miserable young scamp! Why, I'd knock your silly drunken head off."

Here Gibbings, seizing the baronet roughly by the collar, fairly lifted him from the ground, shook him as a terrier does a rat, and then threw him anyhow upon the cushions of his carriage. After that he banged to the door, shouting to the groom on the box—

"Drive on—anywhere. To the devil, if you like! He'll be glad enough to see you with the cargo you've got inside."

Then, as the brougham disappeared down the avenue, Gibbings went quietly up to his room, got together his modest kit, and took the first train into Market Reepham, meaning to call at the police office again and afterwards proceed to London.

CHAPTER LIV.

A NEW LIGHT.

MR. TINSON was sitting with Captain Bracebridge when Gibbings reached the police office.

"Well, what have you got to tell us?" asked the lawyer. "Anything fresh?"

"That depends on how much you know already," said Gibbings, as he looked doubtfully at the chief constable.

"He's on the right side now, never fear," said Captain Bracebridge, laughing.

"And always was," added Mr. Tinson. "Sir Hubert was my client, I admit; but the Lezaires have always been clients of our firm, from father to son these hundred years."

"Your last client don't do you much credit, if I may make so bold as to say so," said Gibbings. "He's a bad lot, and I'm not sorry to be quit of him."

"You've left his service, then. When?" asked Mr. Tinson, eagerly. "That seems rather a pity. You might still have been useful at the Hall."

"Not when he's fly, as I expect he is now. At any rate, he wouldn't let me stop. We parted this morning."

"Is Sir Hubert at the Hall now?"

"No, he drove off somewhere before breakfast,"—and Gibbings proceeded to tell something of the scene at Straddlethorpe.

This sudden departure, and at so early an hour, of a dissolute, lazy young reprobate who always lay late abed, seemed odd. The suggestion from Gibbings that he was on his way to Hazelgrove, or in pursuit of some evil intention with regard to Captain Sutton, was not entirely satisfactory. Mr. Tinson who had had some experience with Sir Hubert, did not believe in his drunken threats.

"It's a thousand pities," the lawyer said, "that you couldn't follow the brougham, or at least notice the direction it took."

"I was wrong, Mr. Tinson, to lay hands upon him. But he stirred my bile. I was wild with him, or I'd have known more about that brougham."

"Couldn't some of your people, Captain Bracebridge, give their attention to Sir Hubert? A wire to the out-stations about Straddlethorpe, for instance, asking whether the brougham was seen this morning and the route it travelled, might bring in someting," suggested the lawyer.

"It's possible, and it's quite worth trying."

The chief constable summoned a superintendent and gave the necessary instructions.

"See here," interrupted Gibbings. "Why not let me go over to Straddlethorpe? They know me at the post-office there. I might ask for a copy of the telegram sent Sir Hubert this morning."

"Come, come, Mr. Gibbings, you'll be getting us into trouble. What right have you to see that telegram? It was not addressed to you. I can't be mixed up in anything of that kind," said the chief constable, very punctilious, at least upon the surface.

"Your scruples do you infinite credit, Captain Bracebridge," laughed Mr. Tinson, adding, with a sly wink to Gibbings, "and I'm sure Gibbings, nere, would be sorry to compromise you."

"Oh, of course," added Gibbings. "On no account."

The chief constable took out his watch, and looked at it ostentatiously, as though to remind his visitors that they were wasting his time, although it might have been a wish to escape from an awkward topic.

"I think, perhaps," he went on after a pause, "that some one ought to go over at once to Bulkeley Wells as you suggest, Mr. Tinson. If Earswick is here we will send him."

The detective, who happened to be in waiting, was called in.

"You will have to go over to Bulkeley Wells by the first train and shadow this woman, as the Yankees say. You know by sight, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, very well; and she knows me."

"Well, stick to her, but don't let her know what you're after, and keep me informed from hour to hour. I think that is all we can do at present," said the chief constable finally, turning to Mr. Tinson.

"When would you be likely to hear about Sir Hubert?" asked the lawyer, taking up his hat.

"At any time. It is impossible to say. Where are you staying? At the Raven? Well I'll send over; or, if you're doing nothing special, look in again here before lunch."

Mr. Tinson and Gibbings left the police office together.

"What's your quickest way back to Stradklethorpe?" asked the lawyer.

"You think I ought to go, then?"

"I don't think at all about it: I'm perfectly sure. And I will go with you."

"A fly'd be best, then, and you can drop me in the village. I'll have that telegram, or a copy of it, or I'll know the reason why."

Knowing Gibbings to be in Sir Hubert's service, and a thoroughly confidential man, the postmistress made little demur to his specious request. Sir Hubert, he said, had mislaid the telegram, and had forgotten part of it. Would she write out another copy?"

This was the message:—

"As I feared, he has sold you. Must see you instantly. Meet me Thrapley Junction, taking 9.50 train from Market Reepham. No excuse; life or death."

"Earswick will have his jaunt for nothing." was Gibbings's first remark, when Mr. Tinson had read the copied telegram. "Them police are always late for the fair."

"So shall we be if we stop talking here," interrupted the lawyer. "Let's go on to Thrapley too. We may come across them yet, or hear where they are gone."

They drove back together to the Midland station at Market Reepham, and there learnt that Sir Hubert had implicitly followed the instructions of the telegram. He had taken the 9.50 to Thrapley Junction.

There was no other train to Thrapley for half an hour, and Mr. Tinson utilized the interval in paying a short visit to the chief constable.

Captain Bracebridge had news for them, as he thought.

"I was on the point of sending for you. Here is a telegram from Earswick. What do you think: the bird has flown."

"Mrs. Leleu? I know that, and more," replied Mr. Tinson, without reading the telegram. "She has gone to Thrapley Junction."

"Earswick says so, and that he has followed her. But how did you find it out?"

"Never mind: that's my affair. But I have no more time. I am going on to Thrapley. Might I make use of Earswick if necessary?"

"Naturally, with regard to the case," replied the chief constable; and Mr. Tinson returning to the station, went on to Thrapley, a small Thorpeshire town lying to the south of Market Reepham some twenty or thirty miles, and about equidistant from it and Bulkeley Wells. The town itself is of little importance, and lies a mile or two from the station, which, however, as a junction for several branch lines, is often crowded and busy.

Mr. Tinson studied his Bradshaw as they travelled. The 9.50

which took Sir Hubert from Market Reepham was due at Thrapley at 10.25, a train from Bulkeley Wells reached the junction at 10.40. The meeting, therefore, would be effected easily before eleven. It would be held and over, Mr. Tinson feared, long before any of them arrived in pursuit. The train which took him and Gibbings was timed to arrive at Thrapley at 11.45; Earswick might be there a little earlier if he caught the 11.15 from Bulkeley Wells.

The three met on the platform. Earswick began explaining his presence there, when Mr. Tinson cut him short, asking quickly—

"Have you seen or heard anything of her here? Go on! Don't waste time. I know why you came here."

"I have seen nothing of her. I was about to make some inquiries when I met you."

"Has Sir Hubert been seen?"

"Here? I'm sure I can't tell. I hadn't the least idea he was coming."

"Of course, we're too late," said Mr. Tinson testily, while Gibbings gave vent to an audible growl against their luck. "However, make some inquiries. I suppose you are known here. Come to me in the waiting-room with your report."

It was quite half an hour before the detective rejoined them, but he had found out all there was to know. Sir Hubert Lezaire had been seen at the station talking to a lady whose description answered fairly well to that of Mrs. Leleu. They had walked up and down the platform for half an hour or more, waiting, so the regular officials said, for the arrival of the through London express. Sir Hubert had seen the lady into her carriage, and a little later had gone back to Market Reepham.

"What's to be done now? Caught I to follow her to London?" asked Earswick. "I think I must take the chief's orders first."

"Captain Bracebridge said I might utilize your services," said Mr. Tinson. "But I don't think you need go up to town. As you are here on the spot, you had better keep an eye on Sir Hubert and his goings-on. Will you make my compliments to the chief constable and say this? I am going back to London, and you Gibbings, can come with me. We will deal with Mrs. Leleu."

"If you want her, you'd better have some one to watch her on arrival, or you'll lose her for good and all," said Earswick. "She's a slippery customer."

"I'll wire to my clerk to see to that," said Mr. Tinson, confidently. "She won't escape him. We shall know when we arrive in town exactly what has become of her."

But in this he was disappointed. Mrs. Leleu was either too wary to betray herself, or she had stopped somewhere short of town. No such person had arrived by the 11.20 express from Thrapley to St. Pancras. Of this there could be no possible doubt, as Mr. Tinson knew that he could depend upon his clerk.

On the whole, then, as he told Lady Lezaire the same evening, his trip to Market Reepham had been profitless, and for the moment the whole affair was involved in great doubt and perplexity.

"All that is quite certain," he said, summing up, "is that Mrs. Leleu's suspicions are aroused. She is evidently on the alert. Something she has heard or knows obliged her to communicate with Sir Hubert instantly, as she said in her telegram. It must have been either to warn him or to make fresh plans."

"She is a very desperate woman, I am convinced. Equal to anything. And there is no knowing what she may do next," answered Lady Lezaire, with a tremor in her voice and an involuntary shudder.

"I wonder how she knows that we are on the move. That is very curious. She saw you at Bulkeley Wells?"

"No doubt. Frisby, my maid, whom she knows, spoke to her."

"Did she see you with Gibbings?"

"Quite possibly, although I cannot certainly say."

"Even that would be little to justify or explain her action. She must know more. But how?"

"Do you know, Mr. Tinson," began Lady Lezaire, nervously, "I have had a strange feeling all day that I was being watched: that some one was following me. I can't quite explain the feeling. It may have been fancy, and yet I don't think it was."

"That's it, depend upon it. She's not the woman to lose a chance. I wonder when the watch began—before yesterday? What have you noticed?"

"The same man, three or four times, wherever I went; a curious-looking man—I always knew him. It seemed so odd that I should meet him again and again. I think, too, he has been hanging about the outside of the hotel. Probably he is there now. Will you look?"

"No, no; I'm accustomed to these gentry. They're as shy as fieldfares, and he'd be off before I touched the window-curtain. Describe him to me, if you can."

"A short, thin man, wearing a long coat with a cape to it that seemed far too big for him. He had a very small face under a large hat, several sizes too large."

"Ah! that ought to be enough. Now—unless I'm mistaken, this hotel has another exit into Stafford Street. Wait five minutes, Lady Lezaire; let me see what I can make of it."

A man answering exactly to the description of the person Lady Lezaire supposed to have followed her, and who was in fact Haggie & Horry's agent, was indeed on the pavement facing Garraway's Hotel. He was sauntering up the street towards its Grafton Street end, but his eyes were turned from time to time towards the first-floor window of the sitting-room occupied by Lady Lezaire. He was either listless or preoccupied, for he had paid no attention to footsteps coming behind, and when he turned to patrol the street back towards Piccadilly, he found himself face to face with Mr. Tinson.

"Oh! it's you, is it, Jesling?" said Mr. Tinson, immediately recognizing him. "I was wondering what had become of you. Are you engaged just now?"

"Have you anything for me to do, sir?" asked the man, trying to evade a direct answer.

"Now look here, Jesling: you've done several jobs for me, and you've found me a good paymaster. Make a clean breast of it. What are you up to now?"

"I was only taking an afternoon walk—waiting for a friend."

"Don't lie. I know better than that. You've been dogging Lady Lezaire."

"I haven't, I swear. I never heard of a Lady Lezaire."

"You mayn't know her name, although you're not so smart as I thought you if you don't by this time. But out with it now. Who are you waiting for? Tell me, or I never employ you again."

"Haggie & Horry. I do odd jobs for them now and again. They're awful screws."

"Perfectly. I understand. Here's a ten-pound note down. Tell me exactly what you've been at for the last two days and you shall have another tenner to-morrow."

The temptation was too strong for the spy, and in less than five minutes Mr. Tinson understood why Mrs. Leleu had taken alarm.

"Do you know who Haggie & Horry are acting for? Better make a clean breast of the whole."

"Some lady in the country. But they're expecting her to-morrow, and I was to go round to meet her in Vincent Square."

"That will do for me," said Mr. Tinson. "You shall have the second tenner when you call, and a third if you keep all this to yourself, and let me know what becomes of the lady from the country."

"You'll let me hang on here, I hope. I shall have to give some report to my employers, or they will smell a rat."

"Do your duty by them as fairly as you please. Only I must know what you are going to report to them, so as to strike out anything inconvenient to us. Remember that, and that if I catch you playing tricks I will do worse to you than Haggie & Horry. You understand?"

And with these words Mr. Tinson left the agent in the street. Returning to Lady Lezaire, he complimented her on her penetration, and recounted what had passed between him and the spy whom he had caught in the act.

"It is all for the best," he said, rubbing his hands. "We shall hold her now through him. She may watch us: what matter? Her agent is in my pay, and will tell us all she is doing."

"I cannot quite understand what you are aiming at, Mr. Tinson. I only know that I feel terribly uncomfortable. There's no knowing what may happen next, with that unscrupulous wretch against us."

"We have got to unmask her, not alone that she should receive her deserts, but that a great injustice, a cruel wrong, should be redressed. Has it not occurred to you how this new light affects your son-in-law?"

"Of course, I saw it at once. I never liked him, and till yesterday I still thought him guilty. Now I cannot but reproach myself for my bitter and vindictive feelings towards him."

"Won't you make it up with them? Offer the olive-branch—at least to your daughter. She, you must admit, was never to blame. It was her duty to stick to her husband."

"Yes, yes; I know all that. But it is so hard to go back, to confess one was utterly in the wrong; I don't know how to begin. How would they receive me? I have been hesitating and hanging back both yesterday and to-day, while the time is running by."

"They are leaving England, are they not? Gibbings told me something. Is it necessary that they should go now? Things might be so changed for them any day if Sir Hubert were dispossessed again."

"Is that possible? Do you think—do you believe that he is wrongfully at Stradllethorpe?"

"I am allowing my imagination to get the better of me. And yet matters are pointing that way. Much will of course depend on the result of our inquiries and the watch set upon Mrs. Leleu. Of course there has been foul play. What is still enshrouded in mystery is the full extent of the crime, for crime there was, and the reason for it. The latter may help us to bring home the guilt."

"Do you think the Colonel's presence in England is essential?"

"He might be very useful. We may want him; I can't say yet. But it would be an additional strength to have him with us; hitherto, of course, it has been all the other way."

"I presume the St. Evelyns would remain if they saw their way? Life has been hard with them of late, no doubt, and he would hardly give up this new appointment without the certainty of other means of livelihood."

"All that could be arranged, I should think, if you choose. A moderate sum would suffice."

"I doubt his accepting a favor from me," said Lady Lezaire. "But I will make the offer, for Rachel's sake and her children's. I ought not to delay any longer. I will go and see them to-morrow."

CHAPTER LV.

MILITARY DISCIPLINE.

SIR HUBERT LEZAIRE, as we know, had returned to Market Reepham alone. Mrs. Leleu wished him, for reasons that will shortly be explained, to accompany her to London. But he had pressing business at Hazelgrove.

General Wyndham-Parker received him as usual with great cordiality.

"Sorry you left us yesterday afternoon. You should have shot

the Kneston coverts. We had really capital sport. Seventy head to five guns."

"It was as well I didn't stay. If I had I shouldn't have seen what I did, and you wouldn't have seen me to day," answered Hubert, in a tone of surly discontent.

"Hey? I don't understand. You didn't see Etta? I know she was on the sick list yesterday."

"I saw her in Haverstock Spinney."

"My dear boy, it's impossible, perfectly impossible."

"Saw her with a chap—you know him—being kissed, and squeezed, and hugged, like any common wench, out in the open day."

"Pardon me, Sir Hubert Lezaire," said the little General, with immense dignity. "Am I to understand that your remarks refer to one of my daughters—to Miss Etta Wyndham-Parker, in fact?"

"I can swear she was in Haverstock Spinney, spooning like mad with the man she calls Sam."

"Captain Sutton! the arch-scoundrel. Has he indeed seduced my daughter's affections? I cannot believe it. It is too monstrous, too humiliating, too painful."

"It can't be half so bad for you as for me," protested the disappointed lover.

"I am her father, sir."

"And I am—I mean I want to be her husband."

This was the first direct declaration the young baronet had made, and the General snatched at the occasion.

"Hey? I am quite taken aback. I had no idea you meant marriage, not at least till now. I fancied you admired Etta, and I could understand it. She is not unattractive."

"Meant to marry her: why, what else brought me here?" blurted out Hubert, rudely. "I'm mad for her. I can't do without her. I must and will have her."

"Wait, wait, Sir Hubert. Allow me. We are very sensible, Mrs. Wyndham-Parker and myself, of the honor you would do us. But we must first think of our own. Let us clear up this miserable business. It may admit of explanation; you may have been mistaken."

"I saw what I saw. Mistake! Who puts his arm round a lass's waist by mistake? I don't: I mean it. He meant it too, and if I'd had my gun."

"That is the way I should wish to call him to account. But unhappily, I think—it was the only check to outrage and insult—the days of duelling are over. Otherwise, and I would have waived the difference in rank, I assure you, I would have had this impudent fellow out. It is not the first time. I have been under fire before now, as you may suppose."

The General looked a very Bombastes, as though his really peaceful services had filled whole pages of "Hart's Army List."

"I'd do for him, double quick," Hubert added, still more blood-thirsty, "just to get him out of the way."

"There will be no need for that. Etta shall have nothing more to say to him, shall never see him again. I can promise you that. She will be guided by her parents, and will choose as we wish. I need hardly tell you, Sir Hubert, whom we should prefer."

"But she must marry me, right away. I won't stand any more of this. It must be either he or me—now, on the nail."

"Of course she will accept you, and you shall marry her with all convenient despatch. But with people in our position there is much to arrange. I am bound to think of my dear child's interests. There must be settlements, you understand. We must call in the lawyers."

"Hang the lawyers. I'll do whatever is right, whatever other chaps have done before me."

"And the trousseau; it cannot be got in five minutes, or for five pounds. Indeed the trousseau is a serious matter just now. We couldn't let our girl go to you quite empty-handed, and to such a house as Straddlethorpe, where of course you will entertain largely, and she must hold her head high. It must be done properly, liberally. But you, Hubert, you have no notion of the frightful, fabulous cost of female dresses and fallals."

"Haven't I, though! I've paid more than one gal's milliner's bill."

"Hush! No more wild oats, you are going to settle down now. I mustn't hear of any such escapades. And in any case I cannot ask you to pay for my girl's things."

If this was intended as a feeler, it missed its mark.

"Although," went on the General quickly, to cover his confusion, "I will confess that I never was so pressed for ready money. You see I get nothing, not one single stiver, from my Irish property, and with my large family the calls are so incessant and so heavy. I shall have to raise an odd thousand or two, I expect."

"Where will you get it?" asked Hubert, with ill-bred inquisitiveness.

"From the bank, I hope. But they're not over-civil to me. I'm not the master of Straddlethorpe."

"Would they advance me cash if I asked them?" inquired Hubert, carelessly.

"Only ask them. Advance? Of course, they'd advance anything to you or your friends. If you like to go with me, now—but you can't want money, surely," he said, stopping short, and looking hard at Sir Hubert, a prey to sudden suspicions. Was it possible that this future son-in-law, so fortunate and so richly endowed, could be short of cash? To what form of extravagance, what secret vices, could this be due?

"I was pinched by the succession duty, and Tinson has been paying off some mortgages. A few thousands will come in very handy for the honeymoon, till they stump up the next half-year's rents and dividends. I've half a mind to try one of them chaps that's always writing to me—Issachar, or Herman Siltberg, or Pampeluna Brothers."

"It is not wise ; I would strongly advise you not to get into their hands," began the General very positively, "unless, indeed, you saw no other chance. In which case—why, damme," he said with frank and charming *bonhomie*,—"damme, I'll go with you and see you through it. There!"

Sir Hubert quite jumped at the offer.

"Let's run up to town, then, and work it out of hand. Are you game, General?"

"I'm with you. This very afternoon too, or to-morrow morning. I will meet you in town—you can start at once if it suits you. I won't ask you to stay to see Mrs. Wyndham-Parker, or—or——"

"No, not Etta. I'd rather wait. But tell her, General, from me, that I don't bear no malice, that I'll never say one word about the other fellow, if only she'll say Yes. I can't do without her ; there's no girl like her in or out of Thorpeshire."

And the young baronet, torn now by jealous rage, now melting into maudlin bewailings, took himself off.

General Wyndham-Parker was glad to be well rid of him. He had business before him which could not keep, and which could best be privately performed.

He meant to proclaim martial law in Hazelgrove ; he meant to hold a court of inquiry, and administer justice with the stern unyielding temper of a strict disciplinarian.

His wife, as commandant of the garrison, was first summoned and taken sharply to task. How could she have allowed such grave irregularities under her very nose ? What ! the girls might come and go as they pleased, parley with an enemy, correspond, flirt, philander, within gunshot of home, and no one a bit the wiser ? Treason, mutiny, insubordination, every flagrant crime was committed, and the General was the last to know.

Mrs. Wyndham-Parker had a very bad quarter of an hour with her commanding officer.

"You are responsible for the girls," said the General, in a cold, hard, official manner, "and you have neglected your duty. I can only tell you of it—I cannot punish you."

"My dear, I am not a common soldier, remember," protested his wife. "The worm will sometimes turn."

"But I have both power and authority over my daughters, and any one who offends shall feel the weight of my hand," went on the General, ignoring his wife's protest.

"But they are not little children now. You cannot chastise a grown-up girl, Wilfrid."

"Discipline must be maintained, Maria. Be good enough to send Etta to me at once."

Presently the offending daughter stood before her father, holding herself erect and defiant at her full height. Her cheek was flushed with the rosy hues that fair complexions so quickly take under excitement ; her blue eyes were swimming in moisture—tears of anger, not penitence ; and her defiant temper might be guessed from

the disorder of her auburn hair, glancing bright in the sunlight, which she had not cared to smooth.

The little General was on the hearthrug, Etta in front of him; she was as tall as her father, and seemed quite unabashed by the severity of his frown.

"I am astonished, literally dumfounded," he began, "that a daughter of mine should be so lost to all sense of propriety of decency"—he spoke slowly, hoping she would interrupt him, but she stood silently staring at him—"so lost," he went on, "so degraded—"

"What have I done? Come to the point, father."

"You have been carrying on a secret intrigue; you have encouraged the clandestine advances of a lover, a man we disapprove of—"

"I will never give up Sam, whatever you say."

"You shall never marry Captain Sutton with our consent. Understand that, once for all. I forbid you to hold any communications with him. We have had another proposal for you, a very suitable, most desirable match in every way."

"I can guess. It's that mean, hateful, little blackguard from Straddlethorpe. But you shan't sell me to him. I wouldn't take him if he was a duke. I couldn't fall so low. I will marry no one but Sam—no one," she repeated again and again with increasing vehemence, stamping her foot each time.

The General was not sorry to see that she had lost her temper. Her behaviour warranted severity. He was justified now in imposing penalties, in using coercion, in fact, to vindicate his outraged parental authority.

"You dare, miss, to defy your father! Such rank insubordination is not to be tolerated for one moment. I'll teach you the respect that is due to me and my wishes. You shall go to your room."

Etta flounced away towards the door.

"I don't care," she cried. "You may lock me up, put me on bread and water, starve me; I'll never give in. I love Sam, and he loves me, and we'll stick to each other, whatever you may say or do!"

"Not another word. Go up-stairs at once, to the old nursery. I will send your mother to you. But don't expect me to speak to you again until you submit. Now, go!"

Miss Etta left the room, banging the door defiantly behind her, and flew up-stairs three steps at a time. She understood the sentence. This old nursery, no longer needed for small children, was still used as a place of penitence and punishment under the Draconian code that prevailed at Hazelgrove. Of late, only the younger children had been consigned to it; but Etta had often found herself a prisoner there in younger days, and it had no special terrors for her.

When Mrs. Wyndham-Parker came to her she was waltzing round the room, singing at the top of her voice so recklessly defiant that

her mother's alternate threats and entreaties were entirely wasted on her.

"I don't care ; I don't care. I won't be bullied. You shan't make do what I don't like, however much you may ill-use me. Go back and tell father so."

Then Miss Etta resumed her wild dance. But when Mrs. Wyndham-Parker had gone, locking the door behind her, Etta, in her turn, bolted it inside, then rushed to the window, saying, "He is still there ; I can easily attract his attention."

It was Joe, the gardener's boy. A window of the old nursery, which was on the first floor, looked into the kitchen-garden, and Joe, a shock-headed simple youth, was a devoted adherent of Etta's.

That same night a letter to Captain Sutton, describing what had occurred and explaining her situation, was posted in the pillar-box in Haverstock Lane.

CHAPTER LVI.

FORGET AND FORGIVE.

NEXT day Lady Lezaire, summoning up all her courage, made her way out to Harrop's Green. Sweet Rachel met her as though they had never been estranged. The St. Evelyns were still in the same lodgings, part of a little house—Lady Lezaire told Mr. Tinson afterwards she had no idea houses were ever built so small—in a long monotonous, terrace street. The exterior, of dingy London stock brick, with its neglected garden and stucco porch, was not inviting; inside confusion prevailed; boxes and portmanteaus in various stages of packing encumbered the sitting-room, from which had already disappeared the few pretty things that Rachel still carried about to beautify their humble home, and which were next to see the light beyond the Atlantic.

"I heard you were in town, mother," went on Rachel cheerfully. "Gibbings told us so. It is so good of you to come out all this way."

"As you were leaving England, I thought—I felt—" Lady Lezaire began a stammering apology, which Rachel, to spare her mother, frankly accepted and cut short.

"Yes; isn't it good news? We were so delighted. It is such a fine opening for Ferdinand. The climate, you know, is beautiful, although cold: so healthy for the children. You will like to see them, won't you? Little Lucy—we called her after you, mother—is a wonderful child. Only eleven months, and so like you: it is quite absurd."

Lady Lezaire did not speak. She was too touched by the simple unswerving devotion she had done so little to deserve.

" You are a good girl, Rachel," she said presently, as she stooped over the cradle of the youngest born, " and I might have been a kinder mother. But you must forgive me——"

" Hush, hush, mother dear," said Rachel, kissing her. " After all you have gone through. Please, please do not refer to the past."

The much-dreaded meeting was over, and when the two ladies returned to the little sitting-room, it was as though there had been no gap or gulf, no painful estrangement between them.

" Where is the Colonel?" asked Lady Lezaire. " I shall see him, I hope."

" I am not sure. He is still working at the station—he remains there till the end of the month—and this is one of his long days."

" Is it far? We might drive there on my way back."

Lady Lezaire, quite contrite, was anxious to make the fullest amends. But her face lengthened and her manner stiffened as she saw Rachel hesitating. Colonel St. Evelyn evidently was not disposed to meet her friendly advances half-way.

" The Colonel would rather not see me, perhaps. Pray don't think of it."

" It is not that; he will be delighted, only too pleased—he said so this morning—to see you again. But he is so worried always at the station; there is so much going on; it is such a public place, and so horrid. I shouldn't like you to see him there first."

" I think I understand now," said Lady Lezaire, brightening. " But I must see him. Suppose you come in to London to-night and dine at my hotel. You can have a carriage both ways; of course at my expense. Indeed, you must allow me," and Lady Lezaire pressed a couple of bank-notes into her daughter's hand.

" But it is far too much," protested Rachel.

" What is left will be of use, I daresay. You must want many things for the voyage, if indeed you must really go."

This was the point on which she wished to speak with St. Evelyn, and she approached the subject with as much trepidation as she had anticipated their meeting. But the Colonel had soon put her at her ease in this as in the matter of his reception. He had come into Lady Lezaire's room as though they had only met the day previous, and had always been excellent friends. He seemed to take it as a matter of course, talked pleasantly on any and every topic—the weather, politics, Thorpeshire—and applied himself to the excellent dinner he so seldom got nowadays with a heartiness that showed he felt himself at home.

He was quite outspoken about the future, and met Lady Lezaire's shy suggestion that the St. Evelyns need not leave England with plain directness.

" Stay? It's not to be thought of, not for one moment. Everything is settled; our passages are taken——"

" Mr. Tinson thinks you may be wanted; he has hopes—still vague, of course—that Hubert may be dispossessed."

" We'll come back fast enough then, won't we, Rachel? But it's a far cry to Loch Awe. I am not too sanguine."

"But you might help so much."

"Lady Lezaire, I can't turn my back on my luck. I've not had too much of late, and four hundred a year is a fortune, even in the New World."

"You shall not want, Ferdinand." It was the first time she had called him by his Christian name. "The world is not too prosperous with me, perhaps; but for Rachel's and the dear children's sakes you shall share."

"It would be rank robbery, Lady Lezaire. I am not ungracious, I hope. I would have accepted your generous offer a few weeks ago, but now there is no need."

"You know we shall be quite rich in Nova Scotia, dearest mother. They say beef is only a penny a pound, and everything else in proportion. Fish, too, and game most plentiful."

"I hope to be able to supply you with both for nothing, Rachel, unless I have forgotten all I know. It is a rare country for sport; that's another reason for going there."

Lady Lezaire sighed almost involuntarily, for she did not care to revive unhappy memories. But she never could forget that sport had taken Sir Percy Lezaire to this same country.

"Of course, if you have made up your mind to go, I shall not be able to dissuade you," she went on.

"No, mother dear; Ferdy is very obstinate always, and this time I think he is right."

The Colonel pretended to scowl at his little wife.

"As if I wasn't always right—"

But at this moment there was an interruption; a waiter came in to announce—

"Mr. Tinson. Would my lady see him if not inconvenient?"

"Do you mind, Ferdinand? or shall I tell him to call to-morrow morning?"

"I mind! not in the least. That is for him to say. He ought to hate meeting me more than I him."

"You had better let him make friends now, Ferdy," interposed Rachel. "I daresay he will be glad to do so, poor man."

"He was doing his duty, or thought he was; I cannot quarrel with him for that, now—"

"He is all on your side," said Lady Lezaire, "and rather ashamed of himself, I expect."

Mr. Tinson did not show it when he came up; he was too self-possessed, too much a man of the world, and shook hands quite cordially with the Colonel as though they had never been enemies. Only a slight and very casual reference was made to the past.

"Glad to see you looking so well, Colonel,"—after all you have gone through, he would have added, and the words, although not spoken, were understood.

"No thanks to you, my friend," replied the Colonel with a short laugh, and in his most off-hand way. "You did your best to send me out of the world. But never mind all that: I'd rather have you for us than against us, I must confess."

"What is your news?" asked Lady Lezaire, coming to the lawyer's rescue. "Anything important?"

"Well, a good deal has happened to-day," said Mr. Tinson, as he sat down and filled his glass. "You know that fellow who was watching you, Lady Lezaire, promised to put me on the track of Mrs. Leleu. He was to meet her this morning at Haggie & Horry's in Vincent Square. The meeting came off, and after that he followed her to where she was staying, a lodging in the Buckingham Palace Road. Having marked her down there he came on to me."

"It seems his job is ended with her. She questioned him a good deal about you, Lady Lezaire, and learnt, so I take it, all she wanted to know; at any rate he was told he need not follow you further, and was practically dismissed."

"That was this morning, then," said the Colonel, "before you came to us, Lady Lezaire. So Mrs. Leleu will not know that we have kissed and made friends."

"I doubt whether she would care to know that. Her object in watching you, I feel sure, was self-defence. When she heard of our trip to Brighton that object was gained; she knew then that we had found out the fraud of obtaining her place with a forged character. And that I am right in this surmise is proved by her having stopped her pursuit. Now is the time to begin ours."

"You have set a watch on her then?" inquired Mrs. St. Evelyn.

"At once—directly I heard her address. And it has borne fruit already. Sir Hubert has been with her to day. He was not long in following her to town."

"Can you guess what brought him?" asked the Colonel.

"Not positively, although I have my own idea. The point is complicated by the fact that Sir Hubert has not come up to London alone. General Wyndham Parker is with him."

"Is it possible that he is associated with these wretches?" cried Lady Lezaire.

"Spiteful little beast! He is quite capable of it and worse," said the Colonel, with hearty disgust.

"But you know they have been trying to catch Hubert for one of their girls; Gibbings told us that," suggested Rachel. "He is very intimate at Hazelgrove."

"The General may merely want to make use of him. They are on some money business, evidently."

"Wyndham-Parker speculates; I know that. He is a guinea-pig too, mixed up with all sorts of rotten companies. Sir Hubert Lezaire of Stradllethorpe might be very useful to him if properly worked."

"There is something underhand in all this, I feel sure. He would naturally have come to me, for we have not openly quarrelled yet, about any straightforward investment, or the question of settlements, if he thinks of marrying one of the Parker girls. But these two—the General and Hubert—seem to have been going round to the Jews. I hear of them calling at three different money-lenders to-day."

"The General's flying the kite, and has got Hubert to back him ; that's about it," said the Colonel.

"That's part of it, but not all. Mrs. Leleu is in it somewhere, else why did Sir Hubert call there this morning?"

"Did he take the General with him?"

"No : which shows that whatever the game is, the General is not entirely in it. But we shall know more to-morrow, unless I'm greatly mistaken."

Soon after this the St. Evelyns took their leave.

CHAPTER LVII.

ETTA'S CONTUMACY.

DRIVING across London to their northern suburb, the St. Evelyns reached Harrop's Green a little before eleven P.M. On arrival at home, they found the house silent and dark, but there was a bedroom candlestick left by the little lodging-house slavey on a chair in the hall.

By the candlestick lay a visiting-card—Captain Sutton's—and beneath the name was written : "Gibbings brought me. Many apologies. Will call again. Implore you to see me."

"Sutton!" said the Colonel, taking up the card. "What can he want at this time of night? Of course we must see him. Rachel, you know the man; it was through him we came here."

"See him? Certainly. He has every claim on us, and he is well introduced by dear old Gibbings. Besides, it must be something urgent."

They waited half an hour or more, and then the late caller appeared. Gibbings was with him, but he waited discreetly in the hall.

"How extremely kind of you!" began Captain Sutton. "I am putting you out horribly, I know, but my excuse is —"

"There is no need to make excuses, Sutton," said the Colonel, quickly. "We are only too glad, believe me, to serve you in any way. We know what we owe you. My wife thinks so too; you don't know her yet. Rachel, my dear."

Mrs. St. Evelyn came forward and welcomed Captain Sutton very prettily and most cordially.

"It is with Mrs. St. Evelyn that my business chiefly is. Don't look surprised, Colonel; I have come to ask her a great favor. You know, or used to know, the Wyndham-Parkers in Thorpeshire?"

"Oh, yes; slightly. Pretty girls, especially one of them—Etta, I think."

The young soldier looked rather sheepish, and hesitated.

"Come, Sutton, out with it," said the Colonel, encouragingly. "We know you've been sweet on Etta: Gibbings told us all about it. And they want her to marry young Lezaire."

"That's just it, Colonel. It's quite devilish to give her to that drunken scamp. And, do you know, they are ill-using her; she is actually under lock and key at this moment, shut up and half starved until she consents."

"Dear, dear!" cried gentle Rachel. "How horrible! how wickedly horrible!"

"It is not to be borne. It makes me wild to think of it. I am determined to put an end to it, and I want you to give me your help."

"What can we possibly do?" asked Mrs. St. Evelyn, looking hopelessly perplexed.

"Go on, young chap," said the Colonel. "Tell us your idea exactly. You may rely on us."

"It's simply this: I want to carry the girl off, she is ready enough to come. But you see I am starting for Halifax next week."

"So are we," said Rachel, beginning to see daylight. "And you would like her to come with us so that you might get married out there—is that it?"

"Trust a woman's wit to fathom an intrigue," said the Colonel, laughing. "Well, Sutton, is that what you're after?"

"Very nearly; only, I want to marry her first, directly I can get her away; and if you would only—Gibbings assured me I might ask you; I know I am presuming, but it is so urgent,—if you would only receive her, take care of her——"

"And let you marry her from our house. I see it all now," said the Colonel. "It's the least we can do for you."

"Oh, Ferdinand! I don't know. It is surely wrong to encourage such conduct. Why, it's an elopement—abduction I think it is called."

"She is over age, and the General will be so sold," pleaded Sutton.

"That settles it," said the Colonel, decisively. "I'd do anything to worry him. Bring her here, Sutton, when you please. We'll do the best for her."

"That we will," said Rachel heartily, smothering her last scruples. "It is the best plan. We have to think of her; you must not compromise your wife."

"You are sure you can manage to get her away? Is there anything else we can do?"

"Only tell Gibbings to come with me. I shall want his help, and he seems a staunch chap."

"Gibbings is true as steel, Captain Sutton. He would go through fire and water for us, and, if we asked him, for our friends," said Rachel, as they called the old soldier in and gave him his instructions."

A lover like Captain Sutton, and on such a mission, was not likely to let the grass grow under his feet. Etta's brief and passionate appeal had stirred him like a trumpet-call.

"Come on, Gibbings; I have a cab waiting. We'll catch the midnight train down from King's Cross."

"Midland's quicker, sir," suggested Gibbings.

"I went that way this morning," replied Sutton, shortly. "Twice in one day by the same line might seem odd, especially if we fail first shot. Besides, we should gain nothing. It's true the Midland train gets in at three, but daylight's not till four, and we shall be there by the Great Northern before that. Can't do anything till daylight."

"You've planned it all out then, sir?" asked Gibbings, with the simple soldier's admiration for a chief with brains and decision.

"To a hair. I can depend on you, can I?"

"Only let me know what I'm to do, sir, and I'm all there—ready for anything, sir, from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter."

"First, then, get what sleep you can going down. You won't see the sheets this night. I mean to sleep in the train." And with that peculiar self-command which indicates an utter absence of nervous irritability, the young officer, directly he got into the railway carriage, snored.

Dawn was not due for an hour or more when they turned out of the Market Reepham station without baggage, and quickly left the town on foot by the Haverstock or Hazelgrove road. It was still dark when they reached the first-named place, a small hamlet within a mile of the General's house.

Sutton went straight to an outhouse belonging to the village public, and unlocked the door with a key he produced from his pocket.

"Horse and trap," he said, briefly explaining. "Put them here myself after sundown. They let me have the key, as I said I was a bagman and must be early on the road. Help me to harness the mare."

In a few short minutes Sutton was driving a smart speedy nag in a neat dogcart towards Hazelgrove, and Gibbings sat behind.

There was light in the east—the first few faint streaks—as they approached the house; and while still half a mile short of it, Sutton pulled up.

"Take the reins, Gibbings, and wait here. We shan't be long, I hope. Where's that boy?"

Joe was on the look-out on the other side of the kitchen-garden fence, and did his part promptly and well. A garden ladder was ready just inside the wicket door. They carried it together to the nursery window; Sutton ran up it, while the boy stood watching, and Etta, ready dressed and with a light bundle in her hand, came to the window in answer to the signal.

It was an elopement of the old-fashioned kind, as simple as it was immediately successful.

Sutton only paused to replace the ladder and save the boy from blame. Ten minutes sufficed for everything,—entrance, climb, exit—all.

"Give her her head, Gibbings," whispered Sutton eagerly, directly he had made Etta snug by his side. The mare went off at score, and the thing was done.

They drove five miles by a country road to a small station, and caught a market train there to Thorpechester, which was on the Great Western. By this the lovers were conveyed to London, reaching it before noon.

Several hours elapsed before Etta's elopement became known at Hazelgrove. The maid who took up the hot water at eight got no answer to her call, but thought the young lady might be still asleep. There was no answer, again, at breakfast-time, and the regulation punishment-diet of Hazelgrove—one cup of sugarless tea and two pieces of dried toast—remained outside the door. This was construed into sulky contumacy by Mrs. Wyndham-Parker, and it was not until nearly eleven that she became inquisitive about her girl. Then the doors were found to be bolted inside,—Etta had taken this precaution,—all was silent within, and becoming thoroughly alarmed, Mrs. Parker desired one of the maids to use the very ladder which had helped Etta to escape, as a means of gaining access to the prisoner's room.

Through these delays no news of Etta's flight reached London till mid-day, and then the telegram which Mrs. Wyndham-Parker had despatched to her husband lay unopened at the Charing Cross Hotel till long past one. The General had been out all the morning on particular business with his young friend, Sir Hubert Lezaire.

They had an appointment together with Mr. Issachar, a money-lender of Mount Street, for noon, and it was with much difficulty that the General had dragged Hubert down-stairs to a late breakfast about eleven.

This was not a meal that had many charms for Hubert, or occupied him long. His morning appetite was never good, and on this occasion was easily satisfied by a teaspoonful of anchovy-sauce thickened with cayenne pepper. Two half-and-half brandies-and-soda followed this scanty but stimulating meal, and Sir Hubert was so far "picked up" as to be able to face Mr. Issachar.

The owner of Straddlethorpe was not a man to be kept waiting in a Jew's anteroom, nor were difficulties and delays likely to interpose between the application for money and the advance of a loan. Mr. Issachar, a self-possessed gentlemanly man, with a well bred manner, and nothing Hebrew about him but the absolute perfection of his attire, received Sir Hubert and the General without delay.

"You are punctual," he said, with a quiet smile. "So am I. Everything is ready, although you gave me little enough time. The sum is large to produce on so short a notice, and the operation is not entirely to my liking."

"I don't know where you'd get a better," protested the General, brusquely. "You must know—it is your business to know—what Straddlethorpe is worth."

"I think I know my business. But give me Straddlethorpe as security, and three times the amount is at your service. I shall have no security, really, but this one life," said Mr. Issachar, pointing to Sir Hubert, who sat huddled up in his chair, limp and scowling.

"Had it suited Sir Hubert to raise this money elsewhere and in the ordinary way, we should not have come to you. I suppose you know that."

"Thank you; I know my business perfectly," replied Mr. Issachar with quiet insolence. "It suits Sir Hubert to come to me, and it suits me to do what he wants on my terms. There they are,—he pointed to the bills lying on the table,—"and there is my cheque book. You sign the one, and I will fill up the other."

Sir Hubert, who had not spoken yet, began now to show signs of impatience.

"What's the good of all this jaw?" he said, snatching the money-lender's bond from the little General, who, with eye-glasses carefully adjusted, had begun to read the document. "You hand over the dibs; I'll sign anything. Where do I put my name?" and following Mr. Issachar's indication, he scrawled his clumsy, ill formed "Hubert Lezaire" upon the stamped paper.

"Now, General, if you will oblige me," said Mr. Issachar. "Thank you; that is for the smaller amount: now, please, the other."

"Pardon me, but that sum is advanced to Sir Hubert Lezaire, not to me; I have nothing to do with it."

"Sir Hubert has signed your bill; you must sign his. I cannot separate the transactions; it is a joint affair."

"But I should become responsible if anything happened. I cannot take such a risk," protested the General.

"Then the whole thing is off," said Mr. Issachar. "I must insist on having both names to each bill."

"Curse it all, General!" said the baronet, with rising anger. "What are you afraid of? It will be all in the family, you know. Besides, I'm bound to take up the bill directly I square Tinson. But I only came here to oblige you; it's just as you please. We'll put the bills in the fire and take our hook out of this."

"Is it to be so?" said Mr. Issachar, holding the bills in his hand and approaching the fire-place.

"No, no; I'll sign." After all, Sir Hubert was to be his son-in-law as the General thought, and this hesitation was both ungracious and unwise.

"You would like cash, perhaps," said Mr. Issachar, when the operation was completed. "My banker's, the Britannia Joint Stock, is only round the corner. I will send for it."

Both the General and Sir Hubert preferred the notes; the first, because he did not choose to pass a money-lender's cheque through his account—the latter, for reasons of his own.

"Take my example, Hubert. Get rid of all these notes. Pay them in at once."

"All right, General: I know what to do with them. Which is your way now?"

"Back to Charing Cross. Isn't it yours?"

"No. Don't expect to see me till feeding-time, and I may be late then."

But the General returning to the hotel, found his wife's telegram and returned post-haste to Hazelgrove. He left a few lines for Sir Hubert, but without betraying the real reason of his sudden recall. Etta's elopement had to be concealed, at least until proof that the mischief was irreparable.

As for Sir Hubert, he went straight to Buckingham Palace Road and remained there for several hours. This was the report made by Mr. Tinson's agent, who was on the look-out in front of the house occupied by Mrs. Leleu.

Sir Hubert's visit to Mr. Issachar was also duly reported, and the lawyer resolved to pay a visit to Mount Street himself.

He and Mr. Issachar were already acquainted. The great people who did business with Harvey & Tinson were sometimes impecunious; peers on the verge of bankruptcy, and heirs-apparent whose succession was long delayed, frequently went to Mount Street when they could not get money at Lincoln's Inn. In the final settlement, however, which came inevitably, the lawyer and the money-lender were brought face to face.

Their relations were perfectly amicable. They were both men of business, and interfered little with each other. As Mr. Issachar said, he only picked up the bone when the other threw it away.

"You've been doing business with a client of mine this morning," began Mr. Tinson, abruptly.

"Which of them? I expect we have many clients in common," replied Mr. Issachar, blandly.

"Young Lezaire, at present master of Straddlethorpe, though there's no saying how long he'll be there."

"Is there any doubt of his title, then, to the estates?" asked Mr. Issachar, anxiously.

"It isn't all plain sailing, that's all I can say now."

"Might I ask as a favor that you will give me an early hint of any probable change?"

"Yes, on one condition; that you tell me exactly what Sir Hubert got from you to-day."

"Ten thousand pounds in notes."

"Have you kept their numbers?"

"Of course. Perhaps I ought to have kept the notes."

"I won't say that, but you had better protect yourself, and recover when you can."

This was all that Mr. Tinson wanted to know. It was impossible to dissociate some pressing demands from Mrs. Leleu from the borrowing of this considerable sum. Extravagant as was Sir Hubert Lezaire, the yearly income of Straddlethorpe was yet more than sufficient to meet the outgoings at the Hall.

He made a memorandum of the numbers of the notes given to Sir Hubert, and thanking the money-lender, took his leave.

CHAPTER LVIII.

PER S.S. APOLLO.

THE steam-tender was alongside the landing-stage at Liverpool, waiting to take off passengers to the great Atlantic liner which lay out in the stream with anchors atrip and blue-peter at the fore. There was the customary confusion, the hurry-scurry of departure —cabs arriving at a gallop with late starters, porters rushing about with luggage, friends and relations interchanging tearful farewells.

The St. Evelyns and their friends made a small group by themselves on the deck of the steam-tug. They and their children, the faithful Gibbings come to see the last of them, the Suttons—now man and wife—he triumphant as one who had dared and won, she radiant and blushing, as became a bride only three days old.

The marriage had taken place at St. James's, Piccadilly. Etta had scouted the idea of a registry office, and had been backed up stoutly by Mrs. St. Evelyn. Women will not forego the service in church.

It was all easily arranged, so easily that Sam wondered he had not been married a dozen times already. The old gentleman at Doctors' Commons, in college cap and gown, who gave him a licence, seemed quite to expect him; and at the church, which was only round the corner from his lodgings in Duke Street, the confidential pew opener "tumbled" very readily to the idea of a very quiet, not to say secret marriage.

Etta was greatly perturbed till it was all settled, even afterwards. Now, when safe under her husband's wing and actually afloat, she saw her father in every fresh passenger, and heard his irate voice in the short commands issued by the captain of the tug.

"Now, cast loose. Who's for the shore? Here! hi! You're too late"—the gangway had been run off; "you'll have to go with us and wait till we run back for the next load. Hold hard, will you? stop him! he'll break his neck."

The remarks were addressed to Gibbings, who, seized by some strange uncontrollable impulse, had suddenly left his friends, and finding the gangway gone, had jumped on to the landing-stage.

"Oh, how dangerous! How foolish of him! What can have happened?" cried Mrs. Sutton, in great alarm.

"Off his chump, I should think," said Captain Sutton, coolly. "Gone cracky. Look! he's running up the quay like mad."

"He might at least have waited to say good-bye," observed Mrs. St. Evelyn, a little hurt at Gibbings's unexpected disappearance. "He promised to go on board with us and take back the very latest news to dear mamma."

"Leave Gibbings alone, Rachel. He knows what's what, and he had some reason for his sudden bolt, you may be perfectly sure."

There was reason enough, as it seemed to Gibbings.

Just as the steam-tender was putting off he had caught sight among the crowd on the wharf of two people whom he recognized at once. They had driven down to the edge of the landing-stage, and approaching with bags and bundles as though intending to go on board, had come to a dead halt, exchanged a few words, then turned tail and regained their cab.

They were old Podifat and Mrs. Leleu. Apparently they had no desire to meet the St. Evelyns. At least so Gibbings quickly concluded, as with a second quick thought he jumped ashore to follow them, and if possible to see more.

The cab drove up Water Street. Gibbings hailed another cab and followed. The first cab followed the quay-side, then turned up a narrow water-side alley and plunged into the labyrinth of streets that surround the docks. So on till James Street was reached, and there the cab halted, before the door of the Dominion Steamship Co. Mrs. Leleu got out, so did Podifat, and both entered the office.

Gibbings waited, keeping his cab, till the others issued forth again, and heard them instruct their driver to take them back to the landing-stage. Then he entered the Steamship office and made a few inquiries.

"I've missed some friends of mine who have a passage in the Apollo, and the tender's gone without them. Have they been here?" Gibbings asked a clerk.

"What like are they?"

"Middle-aged man, and a lady in black."

"In here just now. You'll catch them. They're going off by the mail-tender at 1.30. But if they miss that they'll have to go on to Londonderry; that's the very last chance. I told them so, and I tell you."

Gibbings thanked the clerk and withdrew.

"So they are going to Halifax too—one or both, and in all conscience—why? That's what I must know."

It was then barely twelve. He had a clear hour and a half to settle his plans; disguise himself, watch the pair, follow them on board—anything that he might think best.

Gibbings drove at once to the Adelphi Hotel and asked for Lady Lezaire.

"Is it a coincidence, do you think, or intentional?" she asked, on hearing of Mrs. Leleu's appearance at the landing-stage. "They mean, perhaps to do harm to Rachel, the children. How is it to be averted? We must warn them, if it isn't too late. What do you propose? How can I help?"

"Well, my lady, you can help, I think, and I'll tell you how. Will you advance me—say twenty or thirty pounds?"

Lady Lezaire went to her jewel-case and took out five five-pound notes.

"There are twenty-five pounds. Go on."

"I must first make certain they're going by this boat—if so, I'll go too, and keep my eye on them all the way."

"Will it be safe? Won't they recognize you?"

"My mother wouldn't—if I had a mother—or you, my lady. Wait; you'll see."

There was nearly an hour to spare still. A part of this time, and some of Lady Lezaire's cash, Gibbings spent in buying a red wig and a short beard of the same color; a blue suit, pilot jacket, and wide trousers, with a soft hat and a big comforter, successfully transformed him into a long-shore colonial sea-captain, who—as he proposed to say—was returning to his friends after being cast away and picked up at sea.

He secured a fore-cabin passage ticket as he passed down to Water Street on his way back to the landing-stage, where he found Podifat and Mrs. Leleu waiting to embark.

They were in close but whispered talk, and Gibbings thought it safer to make no attempt to listen, saying to himself—

"I shall have more chances than this on board. It would spoil all to attract their attention. But halloo! she's not going. What am I to do now?"

Mrs. Leleu was shaking hands, while Podifat stood on the gangway.

"Let me hear," were her parting words. "Right away; cable—whatever it costs, I must know. Good-bye."

Then she walked up the landing-stage, and away from the quay-side.

Gibbings, called upon to choose, promptly decided to follow her and not Podifat.

"I'll catch him up and the Apollo at Londonderry. Let's first see what becomes of her."

Mrs. Leleu went straight to a small hotel in Dale Street, then to the Lime Street Station, where she took a ticket—Gibbings overheard—to Thorpechester, the nearest station to Market Reepham.

"I'll let my lady know—she can communicate with the lawyer—and then I'll travel to Holyhead and Paddy's land. I shall be a good day ahead of the Apollo."

It was night-time when, with the mails and a number of other passengers, Gibbings steamed out of Londonderry to join the great liner.

He found his berth without much difficulty, and at once turned in. The work now before him was merely to watch and wait. Podifat could not do much mischief on board ship. Possibly he was meant merely to act the spy, not to do actual bodily harm. Of this, however, the Colonel would be the best judge when he was told what had occurred.

Gibbings saw Podifat the next morning at the steerage passengers' table, a prey to discomfort, and not particularly on the alert. There was little fear of recognition from him.

Friends showed an equal want of penetration. Gibbings waited for a chance of accosting Captain Sutton—he did not wish to risk the surprise or suspicion that might follow the making himself known to St. Evelyn—and this chance did not come for a day or

two. Saloon and steerage passengers do not meet much, except when the former extend their deck walk to the fore-part of the ship.

"Morning, Captain," said Gibbings gruffly, the first time they met.

"Holloa! Who the devil are you?" answered Sutton.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Sutton don't like the passage—haven't seen her on deck. Hush—don't shout out. I'm Gibbings."

Sam Sutton laughed aloud.

"Scissors! You are a rum customer. Last time we say you, you tried to get drowned. Have you shipped now as an A.B.?"

"Beg your honor's pardon for making so bold," said Gibbings, suddenly changing his voice and manner. "But I wants a good word on landing. There are chaps listening," he whispered. "Tell the Colonel I want to speak to him—quietly, soon. He'll know best how to arrange."

"I'll see you again. Come to the fiddle, you know, the smoking-room, at eight bells."

Sutton by that time had told St. Evelyn what to expect, and Gibbings was made free for once of the poop-deck, which he patrolled with the Colonel, talking over the past and making plans for the future, till a late hour.

CHAPTER LIX.

"FISHY—SYDNEY."

THE Apollo's voyage was prosperous. On the sixth day out they made the Banks, and missed the fogs that so often greet vessels approaching Newfoundland.

Two days more and they were within easy steam of Chebuctoo Head, the chief gate of the vast land-locked harbor of Halifax.

The Apollo's stay there would be short; only the few hours necessary to discharge and take in passengers. Every effort was made on board to save time; especially, as the sea was smooth and the weather fair, to get up the heavy baggage from the hold without waiting arrival in port.

The upper deck was soon lumbered with heavy cases and sea-chests, of which the St. Evelyns owned a modest share. The funds so generously advanced by Mr. Carrington Lomis had been wisely expended in outfit and goods, which could be bought more cheaply at home than in the colony.

The Colonel's military training had made him an excellent "baggage-master," and he was proud, not without reason, of his skill in packing, and of the order and system applied to the care and disposal of his belongings.

One notable precaution—copied from the practice of a regiment on the line of march—was to plaster a great printed label on every case or package, bearing his name, ultimate destination, the number of the case, and its uses during the voyage. The address was:—

COLONEL ST. EVELYN,

SYDNEY,

CAPE BRETON.

Per S.S. APOLLO.

No.

while the lighter pieces had the word "Cabin," and all the heavy the word "Hold."

Light and heavy alike were now mustered under the owner's experienced eye, to be counted and examined; while Gibbings, with a pipe in his mouth, sat a little way off on a coil of rope, quietly observant, but unable for prudential reasons to assist his old master.

Some one else had an eye on the St. Evelyns' baggage—that was soon evident. From the moment the hold was opened Podifat had come aft and loafed about as near as he dared.

Presently the Colonel, satisfied that all was right, rejoined his wife upon the poop. Then Gibbings saw Podifat slyly draw near the baggage and examine it in his turn.

He was reading the address-label—that's what he was at. From mere curiosity, or with some special purpose? Gibbings could not be sure.

A preconcerted signal to Captain Sutton soon brought the young officer to where Gibbings now stood waiting.

"Tell the Colonel," the latter said, "what I caught the old rascal doing—that I'll stick to him when he gets on shore and see where he goes. If I happen on more, I'll come or send to the Colonel's hotel—which is it, by the way?"

"The Acadian, in Della Torre Street."

"If I don't turn up there I'll join him later at Sydney."

"But how are you off for coin, Gibbings? You may run short."

"My lady stood paymaster before I started, and I'll do fine for some weeks."

"Remember, the Citadel Barracks will always find me—the regiment's there. I owe you more than one good turn, Gibbings, and if I can repay you I'll—"

"Don't talk about it, sir. And don't stop with me now, that son of a gun might suspect something. Give my message to the Colonel, that's all. I've got my work to do now. He's a slippery old chap, and knows his way about, I think, in these parts."

Old Podifat was one of the first to go over the side when the Apollo made fast by the wharf. He landed by the steerage gangway forward, and carried all his belongings with him. His gun case, nearly new, Sir Hubert's gift, in one hand, with the other he held his salmon-rod, also in its case, and from the same source. A light bundle hung from the latter, and contained all his personal kit.

Gibbings, still more lightly equipped, was close at his heels. Halifax was new ground to him, but clearly not to the man he followed.

Podifat went straight up the by-street that led from the wharf with the confident air of one who knew his way, although, as he emerged into the better part of the city, he looked up and around as though surprised and bewildered. Since he had last seen Halifax it had been burned down more than once, and emerged a handsome stone phoenix from the wood ashes of its older construction.

Approaching Hollis Street and the best quarter of the city, he paused to ask a question, which Gibbings overheard, and for which, recollecting what had occurred at the Liverpool landing-stage, he was pretty well prepared.

"Telegraph office? Why, it's with the post-office in the Provincial Buildings, second street to left, third block. Can't miss it."

"All right, old hoss," said Podifat, going on his road without halting or turning round.

Gibbings paused on reaching the telegraph office, doubtful whether to enter with him or wait outside. Following a sudden impulse he passed the doors, and seeing Podifat busy at the desk slowly and painfully shaping his letters, took post near him unobserved. He was within earshot when Podifat handed in his message to the operator. It was a wretched scrawl, almost illegible.

"Where did you get your schooling? Satan! what a fist! L-e-l—" went on the clerk, spelling it letter by letter.

"Leleu, Straddlethorpe, Thorpeshire, England," shouted Podifat. "I can read it if you can't."

"I ain't deaf, my man. You'd better read the rest. F-i-s-k, fisk. What's fisk?"

"Fishy, you fool! fishy, Sydney. That's all you've got to send."

"No signature? Or maybe your name's Sydney?"

"What's my name to do with you? How much? Seven dollars? Who—up! That's tall. There's the mopusses," and Podifat turned to leave the office.

"Here! hold hard! Sign your address at the bottom."

"Shan't! Haven't got one. I'm only just landed from the mail, and I'm going straight home."

"Where's home? That'll be good enough for us."

"River Inhabitants, Canso Straits. D'ye know the township? That's where I was born and bred, and where some day I'll die, if I'm allowed to die in my bed."

"You'll maybe die with your boots on, Mr. Sydney, if that's your name. What can I do for you?" went on the clerk to Gibbings, and turning his back on Podifat, who straightway left the office muttering curses as he went.

Gibbings accounted for his presence by inquiring about the telegraph rates to San Francisco and New-York, then hurried from the office after Podifat, whom he tracked finally to the railway station, where he heard him ask his way to Canso Straits, and heard the answer,

"Train to Truro and Pictou—take the stage on, or there is a steamer runs from Pictou to Port Hawkesbury twice a week. You can get on from there again by steam ferry, or stage, where you please."

"Pointing homeward, that's evident," Gibbings said to himself. "We shall know where to pick him up again if we want him. But ought I to follow him there? I can at any time, if I like. I'd better consult the Colonel, perhaps. Anyway, I've found out a good deal already."

There was a council of war when Gibbings reached the Acadian Hotel with the latest news. The meaning of the cablegram was first discussed.

"Sydney of course refers to us," said the Colonel. "Mrs. Leleu clearly wished to know our destination. Why the other word fishy?"

"It can't refer only to Sydney itself," mused Mrs. St. Evelyn. "Of course a seaport is fishy?"

"We must take the other, the slang meaning of the word, my dear. Fishy is unsatisfactory—dangerous, in fact. That's what Podifat implies. Our being at Sydney will be fishy for them, d'ye see?" went on the Colonel.

"No doubt, Ferdinand, that is it. But why?"

"We may find out when we get there. Podifat perhaps may help us—we mustn't let go of him."

"I may catch him still at the station," said Gibbings, starting up.

"No, he might see you. We know where he is going. This Canso is not a long journey from Sydney: the Canso Straits separate Cape Breton Island, unless I have forgotten my geography. But let's have up the map."

They had a large survey-map of the whole colony of Nova Scotia in the hotel, and it was soon unrolled on the table before them.

"Canso? Canso? Why is the name so familiar to me?" asked Mrs. St. Evelyn.

"To be sure—I remember now. It's the place where Priscilla Spary came from: Hubert's mother, your father's first wife," went on the Colonel.

"Don't speak of her," began Rachel, with manifest disgust. "But stay. Here is Louisville, where the marriage took place. It cannot be far from Sydney—what is it?"

"By the scale, some twenty-five to thirty miles."

"Then we know why they think it fishy," quickly concluded Rachel. "These are fresh clues which must surely lead us to more."

"They must be followed at once," said the Colonel, decisively. "Are you game to go on, Gibbings?"

"For you, and the mistress, and the children, sir, I'd go on into the bush, round the wold, to the North Pole! Only give your commands!"

"Well, then," the Colonel was again studying the map and the

colonial railway guide, "you must pick up this Podifat somehow and somewhere, but as soon as you can. He will only have a short start, even if he took the first train to Truro and Pictou. The day is still young, and you will catch the later train. This will land you at Pictou in plenty of time for the next boat to Port Hawkesbury—to-morrow night, or for to-morrow morning's stage for Antigonish. Do you understand? Or shall I give you a route-paper, as if you were going on escort?"

"Tell me the names all over once or twice, sir. They're strange, and I may forget them."

Gibbings soon learned his lesson by heart.

"I know my drill now. It's all straight and plain. Only I'd like to know how I am to send you word, or get on to you if there's anything important," he asked, as if prepared to take his departure.

"Here, Gibbings," said Mrs. St. Evelyn. "I had thought of that. These envelopes are addressed to the Colonel—post one anywhere if you want help; the post-mark will bring us to you, or come to us with your news. We shall be only too glad to see you, my good friend."

Then she shook hands cordially with the staunch old soldier and bade him God-speed.

A couple of days later the St. Evelyns again embarked, now upon a small steamer that plied between Halifax and Cape Breton. The Suttons remained in the garrison city, but it had been agreed that if Sam could get leave he was to bring his wife to visit St. Evelyn, while he joined the Colonel in a hunting expedition after bear and cariboo among the forest solitudes that margin the great Lake Bras d'Or.

CHAPTER LX.

HUNTERS AND HUNTED.

GOSSIP flies fast in a country neighborhood. For all the General's anxiety to silence scandal, his daughter's elopement was common talk within twenty-four hours. The servants at Hazelgrove knew exactly what had occurred, and knowing, were not likely to hold their tongues. The story crept out into the village, whence, with many additions, it travelled through the country to Straddlethorpe, where Sir Hubert heard it from the butler the day he returned from town. This was on the Tuesday following the negotiation of the loan, and on the very day of the departure of the Apollo.

"You lying thief!" cried Sir Hubert, aiming a blow at Purfrey with the butt-end of his driving-whip. "Miss Etta bolted! I'll teach you to spread such lies."

"It's gospel truth, Sir Hubert. She went last Thursday. I've seen a chap as met the trap just half a mile out of Thorpechester,"

"Last Thursday! Then old Parker must have known, and he never let on a word. Why did he want to keep it dark from me? Sinful old rogue! Curse him—and her. But what's come of her? Has he gone after her? I'd like to go with him, if it was only to be even with them as got her away."

As the result of further thought, backed up by a late lunch and a decanter of strong brown sherry, Sir Hubert mounted his horse and rode over to Hazelgrove.

"My dear boy," began the General with elaborate friendliness, "when did you get back? I had been hoping to hear of or from you, wondering why you stayed on in town. Sly dog! Boys will be boys, and London, with money to spend, is a most delightful place."

No word of Etta's flight. Even Sir Hubert, with dull brutish mind, half dazed with drink, detected a want of candor.

"Look here, General! you ain't acting fair and square with me. I know all about it. Where's Etta?"

"My dearest boy," repeated the General, putting his hand to his face and struggling with emotion, "how was I to tell you! But you will forgive me. If you could know the grief, the pain and anguish I suffer, to think a girl of mine should so far forget herself! I think—I feel sure—all my children are not like her."

So many days had elapsed since the elopement, that the General had abandoned all hope of recovering Etta and smothering up the scandal. It was too generally known, both the flight and the harsh treatment that had preceded it. Moreover, the transaction with Mr. Issachar rendered it imperative that the General should keep on good terms with young Lezaire. Perhaps Sir Hubert might now transfer his attentions to one of the other girls.

"Tell us more about it," asked Sir Hubert, rudely. "When did she go? How? With whom?"

The General gave a short account of the affair, so far as he had elicited the details.

"It was that Sutton, of course. Why didn't I do for him?" cried Sir Hubert. "But I'll have his blood yet."

"Hush! hush! my dear boy. I can understand your feelings. But such dreadful threats—"

"Which way did they go? Have you tracked them? Aren't you going to follow them up?"

"Yes; but which way shall we follow? I haven't the least idea what has become of them."

"Have you made no inquiries, General? What have you been doing all these days?"

General Wyndham-Parker did not like to confess that he had abstained from all action because he was ashamed to take it. He hated the scandal, and wished to attract no further attention to it. An unpleasantness that cannot be mended is best allowed to blow over.

"Well, I have been so much upset—my dear wife has been so ill

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—that I couldn't take any steps. But if you wish it—and I think I ought—I will go to the police. Some inquiries should be set on foot. I ought to know what has become of her, wicked, misguided girl though she be. Will you ride in with me to Market Reepham? I will order a horse. We will call on the chief constable."

"I don't think you will want me for that, General," said Sir Hubert, with the strange reluctance he always showed to be brought into close relations with the police. "I'm game to go with you anywhere, after them; or I'll go alone, if only you give me the tip. Come on to Straddlethorpe after you have seen if there is anything to tell, or I will come back here."

The conversation which followed was desultory, a repetition and variation of that which had gone before. It was ended when they parted in Haverstock: the General riding to Market Reepham, Sir Hubert returning to the Hall.

Old Purfrey met him with a telegram.

It was from Mrs. Leleu.

"News; meet me Market Reepham station four-thirty."

It was then nearly four.

"Run round to the stables," shouted Sir Hubert to Purfrey. "I want a carriage, the brougham, in less than five minutes. Look slippy, all of you, or you'll get the sack."

Sir Hubert was in such haste that he followed himself, and helped to harness and put to.

"Make room there!—give me the ribbons," he said to the groom, and flogging the big mare in the shafts, began a wild break-neck drive which got him to Market Reepham just within the time.

Mrs. Leleu was at the window of a second-class compartment as the train ran in, and at a signal from her Sir Hubert turned away to leave the station. She followed close, whispering, "Come on; into the town, anywhere private. I want to speak to you quietly."

"Here, jump in." Sir Hubert held open the brougham door. "He can drive towards the Hall, or on the Thorpechester road. What have you got to tell me that wouldn't keep?"

"That blackguard Colonel has started for America—I fancy for Halifax. They told me as much at the steam-packet office."

"Is he fly, think you? Has he gone out alone?"

"No; all his brood is with him. That's what I don't understand. He may be going out to settle, but why there? I don't like it, not a little bit."

"What can you do?"

"It will depend on what I hear."

"Jacob is going in the same ship. He is to let me know at Straddlethorpe—I gave him that address—and I've come here to wait for more news."

"You don't want to wait at the Hall, do you?" asked Sir Hubert, sulkily.

"Somewhere near. Why, ain't I welcome? Have you got some madam or missy there? I don't care—so long as it isn't that white-livered jade you wanted to marry. But you can't do that, not now,"

"How do you know that? You have heard, then, she's gone?"
"I guessed it. I saw her this morning—I was going to tell you—saw her with her man."

"What!" screamed Hubert. "Saw her! And you didn't tell me! When, how, and where did you see her?" He clutched his companion fiercely by the arm.

"On board the tender; going off to the Apollo with that man—the same man as used to come philandering after her down here. They were with the St. Evelyn lot, under their wing."

Sir Hubert's next remark was spoken to his coachman through the front window of the brougham.

"Drive back to town—to the police office. Drive like hell, d'ye hear!" he shouted.

"Not there. Don't go there; it isn't safe. I'd rather they did not see us together," protested Mrs. Leleu.

"There is no reason they should. You can sit back in the brougham and wait while I run in. I must see old Parker. I may catch him there."

The General was still with the chief constable in the outer office on the first floor when Sir Hubert burst in.

"I've heard of her. She has gone by steamer this morning."

"One moment, my dear fellow," interposed the General. "What extraordinary story is this? How on earth have you heard, and how much?"

Sir Hubert Lezaire, without surrendering the source of his information, repeated what Mrs. Leleu had told him.

"By the Apollo, from Liverpool, this morning?" said the chief constable, turning over the leaves of the office "Bradshaw." "For Halifax and Portland, *via* Londonderry."

"Then we shall catch them at Londonderry if we give chase. Yoicks! Tally-ho!" and Sir Hubert gave an unearthly yell. "Come along, General; you shall tear her from them. It's no good going without you."

"From them?" asked the General, amazed.

"Yes, them; the St. Evelyns. She's with that murdering Colonel and silly white-faced Rachel. I know. Some one has told me who saw them all together."

"Colonel St. Evelyn? To dare to mix himself up with my affairs! He ought to have been hanged, and will be yet."

"If he isn't drowned," said Captain Bracebridge, laughing. "But seriously—you don't tax him still with that Stradleighorpe crime?"

"I'm as certain still as if I'd seen him do it. The law made a ghastly *fiasco* there. Do you mean to say you don't agree with me?" went on the General, seeing the chief constable shake his head.

"I don't; I never did, thoroughly—but less than ever within the last few weeks. Something very curious has turned up, you know."

"What! More evidence? Some fresh clue?"

"The strangest and strongest clue. We came the other day upon

— Wait a moment," said the chief constable, suddenly correcting himself. He saw that Sir Hubert, with eager face and wide-open eyes, was listening to every word. "Come inside," and Captain Bracebridge led the way to an inner private room, and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER LXI.

ONLY A WOMAN'S HAIR.

THE inner room to which Captain Bracebridge conducted General Wyndham-Parker was his own private office, comfortably furnished, with an arm-chair beside the writing-desk, into which the chief constable motioned the General, while he himself went to a cupboard in the corner of the room. This cupboard he unlocked with a key from his own bunch.

"I call this my curiosity-shop," said Captain Bracebridge. "It's a sort of museum where I keep under lock and key anything connected with big cases. Here, for instance, is the gun seized from one of the Blythwood poachers; you remember the case, when police constable Davis was shot. And this is the identical saucepan in which Mother Raskelf boiled her husband after she had chopped him up with a hatchet. And this is a bit of the rope that hanged her and her precious boy, who was an accomplice."

"Very curious, certainly," replied the General, shuddering. "But what have these things to do with the Stradluthorpe case?"

"Nothing, of course. But this has, and it is what I wanted to show you." Captain Bracebridge now produced the celebrated Inverness, which had been added to the museum after Earswick had brought it over from the North Lodge.

"That greatcoat! Surely it isn't the Colonel's missing Inverness?"

"But it is, and nothing else. I should have recognized it from the description. But besides, it was identified by the Colonel's man, Gibbings, who helped to find it."

"Doesn't that look rather suspicious? You remember it was his evidence that saved the Colonel. Probably he was an accomplice."

"The circumstances under which the coat was found satisfactorily dispose of that suspicion," said the chief constable, as he went on to detail the facts.

"Then you think it had been hidden there in the Stradluthorpe Lodge on purpose?" asked the General after he had heard the whole story.

"I do, and by the persons, or more exactly the person, who had used it as a disguise."

"But—but that is bringing us on to the trail of the real culprit, always supposing it was not the Colonel. Why should not he have hidden the coat?"

" You don't give up a point easily, General," said Captain Bracebridge, with a smile. " I should be sorry to have you against me. But how could the Colonel have worn it? It was decided in court that he never went to Cleobury the night the poison was bought."

" Only on Gibbings's evidence, which I have never believed. I must have more than that to satisfy me that it was not St. Evelyn himself in his own coat who visited the chemist."

As he spoke the General had taken the Inverness in his hands, and was turning it over curiously.

" I wish it could tell us who wore it last," he said thoughtfully; " for that last, you may depend upon it, was at Cleobury. Has it ever been overhauled? People have been known before now to leave things in their pockets."

" Hardly when on such a job as buying arsenic in disguise. And I fancy—I am certain, I think—that the coat was thoroughly examined when we first got hold of it. It ought to have been."

" Who searched it?—you or one of your subordinates, Captain Bracebridge?" said the General, who by this time was fumbling in the many pockets of the Inverness. " Whoever it was, he missed this."

The General pulled out a glove, a red dogskin glove, and both inspected it with deep interest.

" One of the Colonel's, I suppose," said Captain Bracebridge. " There is nothing strange in finding it here."

" Not a bit of it. Trust a man with a house full of daughters to know a woman's glove. See inside here, the number—63. Look at it for yourself."

" A woman's glove? By George! you're right. Is there anything more? Allow me," and the chief constable took the coat from General Wyndham-Parker's hands. To get a better light he moved towards the window, which was close by the door communicating with the outer office.

" I see nothing more," he said. " One or two scraps of paper only, part of a torn letter. A man's writing; I should think Colonel St. Evelyn's. Do you know his hand, General?"

" I couldn't swear to it. But you ought to be able to compare it by-and-by. They care of the pieces. Is that all?"

" All in the pockets, yes. But see here, this is rather curious."

Captain Bracebridge had been fingering the coat, and had passed his hand along the collar on the inner side. He now held up to the light one long hair.

" What is that? Horse-hair?" asked the General.

" It is too fine for that. And it is not the Colonel's; too long, he was always close-cropped. It is a woman's hair, General; evidence corroborating the glove, that a woman wore this coat last."

" What a surprising thing! It must be so, Bracebridge. But what woman?"

" I think I can form an idea. A woman who has been cropping up constantly of late, and who is becoming more and more implicated in the Straddlethorpe murder."

"God bless me! you take my breath away. What woman? What is her name?"

"She was housekeeper at the Hall, and went by the name of Mrs. Leleu. We have had our eye upon her lately, and now I think there is enough to run her in, if only we can find her."

"I am fairly taken aback. I don't know what to make of it all," said the General, reluctant to part with long-cherished convictions. "This changes the whole complexion of the case."

"You'll have to confess you misjudged the Colonel. But I take it this means more than the arrest of the real murderer; it is likely to affect the ownership of the Hall."

"Do you mean to say that young Lezaire is mixed up in the business? Never!" cried the General, aghast.

"I shouldn't like to say so much as that, seeing that he is a friend of yours. Besides which, he is out there"—Captain Bracebridge pointed with his thumb to the outer office—"and I shouldn't like him to overhear. Are you going with him to Londonderry?"

The General did not know how to answer; he was unhappy, very unhappy in his mind. His evil fortune—or more exactly his blind cupidity, although he wouldn't admit so much—had involved him deeply in relations which might bring him discredit, disgrace, perhaps even a ruinous loss.

"You had better keep what I have told you to yourself. But especially no word to him."

"Perhaps we ought to go back to him," said the General, "although for the life of me I don't know what to say now or do."

Sir Hubert Lezaire was no longer in the outer office.

"Tired of waiting, I suppose he has taken himself off," said Captain Bracebridge. "But I will just inquire."

A constable answered the summons.

"The gentleman who was here, sir, drove away in his brougham more than ten minutes ago."

"Left no message? Was he alone?"

"No, sir. There was a lady in the carriage while it waited."

"What lady?" cried the General. "You must be mistaken."

"Could it have been Mrs. Leleu?"

"That was the lady's name, I think. Inspector Earswick saw her too, and I believe went after the brougham."

"That was smart of him. He will run them down," said Captain Bracebridge, with much satisfaction, "and we shall know where to find her when she is wanted, which, I take it, will be before long. Can I be of any further use to you, General?"

"I cannot quite say." The little General was growing more and more bewildered. "I am so taken aback by all this. Only I beg of you to keep me informed of all that goes on. It will be serious—more than serious—if I have allowed myself to be compromised by this young scamp, as I greatly fear he is."

General Wyndham-Parker returned to Hazelgrove that night a broken-down, dispirited man. Having communicated the last news

about Etta to his wife, he proceeded, with the injustice often displayed by the stronger sex, to visit the whole blame on Mrs. Wyndham-Parker.

"It was all your doing," he repeated. "Why did you persuade me to take the fellow up?"

"You know, Wilfrid, you asked him here yourself. I shouldn't have thought of it."

"You thought he would do for Ica, and you encouraged his attentions to Etta, although I strongly disapproved. Throwing our girls at his head, and making a laughing-stock of ourselves in the county."

"Why, do you think people know about Etta?"

"Know! Every one knows."

"And people are talking about us? Dear, dear, how distressing! What do they say?"

"Nothing to me, of course. But old Etherly was chuckling over it at the club—I am sure he was; and Lord Prudhames, who was never too friendly, would not look at me in the street to-day."

"We shall never be able to hold our heads up—to look people in the face. That wicked, wicked girl!"

"That's not the worst. At least, she's off our hands."

"You think they're married, then?"

"We may be sure of that—or they mean to be—as she was with Mrs. St. Evelyn. But I tell you there is far worse behind."

And the General went on to speak of the suspicions against Sir Hubert, and of the bill transaction, with the awful responsibilities it would entail if the Lezaire property ever went back to the other branch.

"We shall be ruined—utterly," said little Wyndham-Parker, with something like a sob. "I can never pay. He'll make me a bankrupt, that villainous Jew! I must give up my clubs. We shall have to emigrate, or I must sweep a crossing. God knows what——"

Meanwhile, full of the new anxieties caused by what he had overheard—for he had listened at the keyhole to all the chief constable's talk—Sir Hubert had gone back to Mrs. Leleu in the carriage.

"We must separate; you are in danger. Where would you like to go?" he asked her hurriedly, as, bidding the coachman drive back to the station, he took his seat beside her.

"To Straddluthorpe," she replied, very coolly, as soon as she had heard all that Sir Hubert had to tell her.

"That you won't. What should I do? I won't be dragged into trouble."

"You won't, eh? You'll do just as I tell you, and just as I choose. I'm going to Straddluthorpe to stay. You must hide me there for as long as I want, or until I hear from Jacob, d'ye see?"

"But if they come after you? They will—they may be following now."

"I hope they are—the whole lot of the Thorpeshire police. I know them; if they're like that Earswick, they'll be easily fooled."

Earswick at this moment was behind in a Market Reepham fly, chasing the brougham. He followed it, always at a respectful distance, first to the Market Reepham station, where a porter put a good-sized travelling bag on the driving-seat by the coachman, then on again by the highroad straight to the lodge-gates of Straddl thorpe Hall. As it was now dark, he promptly climbed the park railings, and running across the grass, forestalled the brougham, which had taken the more circuitous carriage-drive. From a safe place of concealment in the shrubbery, he saw Sir Hubert alight and hand out his female companion. Both then entered the house.

"Gone to ground. Now I must stop the earths. Some of my friends in the servants' hall will keep me informed of her movements."

Through the watch thus established, Earswick heard regularly of Mrs. Leleu; that she had again taken up her quarters at the Hall, but seemingly as a guest, not in any menial capacity. She was supposed to be ill, kept her room—or more exactly rooms, for a snug suite had been put at her disposal—and here she had her meals and spent all her time.

Several days passed, and then the moment for further action arrived. The chief constable felt justified in asking for a warrant to arrest Mrs. Leleu.

He had written a long letter to Mr. Tinson for his and Lady Lezaire's information, giving an account of the discovery made in the Inverness. At the same time he forwarded the scraps of paper found in the pocket, with the female glove, and asked if the handwriting could be identified. Was it Colonel St. Evelyn's or whose?

Lady Lezaire spoke without hesitation. The writing was either Sir Percy's or an extraordinarily clever imitation. In either case the fact was strange, not to say suspicious.

Mr. Tinson sought the advice of the Treasury Solicitor, who in turn consulted the Public Prosecutor. It was decided to lay hands at once on Mrs. Leleu; and Earswick, with another policeman, went to make the arrest.

The bird was flown.

Sir Hubert Lezaire at first clumsily denied, then was forced to admit, that she had been very recently at the Hall—an old servant, he explained, to whom he was glad to give a home while seeking a new place.

Earswick very properly refused to accept any but his own evidence of her departure, and made a minute but fruitless search of the whole house.

CHAPTER LXII.

AUNT CORCKRAN'S.

IT WAS the late autumn, the fall of the leaf and of the year, when the St. Evelyns settled in their new home. They were greeted by that glorious season known as the Indian summer, a brief spell of magnificent weather that comes late, and with strange fleeting sun-shine preludes the long stern winter close at hand. Under a cloudless sky the autumn landscape glowed with all the gorgeous color peculiar to the land ; the dying leafage blazed with brightness ; the strongest colors, passing from cadmium to blood-red, contrasted often with vivid green, sparkled in the sunlight. Late flowers decked the undergrowth and jewelled the mossy ground, while clusters of crimson berries hung on many a hush. The stems of the trees were of varied tint and form ; snow-white birch stood near noble straight-limbed hemlocks, graceful black spruce-fir, and lofty primeval pine.

There was a little settlement at the Nom de Dieu mines ; the shanty-residences of the miners, with the stores to administer to their needs. The forest had been cleared for half a mile around, and at the edge of the clearing stood the St. Evelyns' house, frame-built—of wooden boarding, that is to say : an unpicturesque but not uncomfortable dwelling, of royal dimensions, as Rachel thought after the narrow lodging at Harrop's Green.

It was a rough and-ready life rather ; they were on the far verge of civilization, if not beyond it. The nearest town was eight or ten miles distant by the road, but ere long the distance would be shortened by half when winter froze the harbor hard, and a direct track, marked out by fir-boughs, was made across the snow-covered ice. Supplies had to be laid in against the winter, the house victualled with flour, and salt pork, and groceries, and tinned or canned meats innumerable. All this Rachel saw to herself, advised and assisted by the "helps" she found in the settlement : a Scotch miner's German wife, a comely comfortable Frau, and a slatternly Irish girl, one of a numerous brood, crowded out, and glad to take service away from home.

While Rachel prepared for the long winter, and busied herself with the ordering of her primitive establishment, the Colonel threw himself heart and soul into his new work, gathering up into his strong hands the whole system of administration, taking command of every one and everything in that matter-of-course, not-to-be-denied fashion that is only gained by military training. He was wise enough to make no changes till he had mastered the whole of the details of working ; then, by rearranging the labor shifts, and exacting more punctual attendance, he obtained better results from the miners with less demands on their time. One of the gangers tried a fall with him, but was badly beaten ; while the clerk in the office found himself summarily dismissed after an unsuccessful attempt to play fast and loose with the figures.

Thus busily and pleasantly occupied, a month slipped by almost unnoticed by either St. Evelyn or his wife. They had hardly time even to wonder what Gibbings was doing, and why he had made no sign beyond sending one of the addressed envelopes with which they had provided him. It bore the postmark "River Inhabitants," so they were certain he had reached the place to which Podifat was also pointing. Beyond that they knew nothing, but were content to wait patiently, and almost without anxiety, feeling sure that he could be trusted to report progress in due time.

The reader shall now hear how Gibbings fared.

He made the journey by rail to Pictou, a port on the north Nova Scotian coast, and halted there a day or two without coming upon any traces of Podifat. But, taking the local steamer to Port Hawkesbury, he found his man on board. He was able to watch him during the voyage, avoiding recognition till they landed at the wharf, when Podifat came upon him suddenly.

"Holloa, mate! where have I seen you before?" he said, eyeing Gibbings suspiciously as they stood together in front of the stage office.

"On board the Apollo," answered Gibbings boldly, thinking this confession safer than any denial.

"What are you doing in these parts? Do you be'ong down here? Seafaring? Or a longshore sailor?"

"I was cast away last voyage, picked up, and landed in England. I was in a coal brig from Sydney, Cape Breton, and I'm making my way back there to squeeze something out of the owners, or get a new berth."

"You'd better be smart, then. It's getting late to ship. Why, the ice may come down next month and shut up all the traffic."

"I don't know what I'll do then. I'd better have stayed in Halifax, perhaps, or even in Pictou. But I'm bound to try for a job. Anything doing round about here?"

"Can't say. Haven't been this way for twenty years or more. Are you going by the stage? Yes? Come in and liquor, then. A drain o' white-eye'll do yer no harm."

Gibbings accepted the invitation, then stood drink in his turn, and liberally repeated the process after the stage started, till Podifat was half-seas over, and pretty well incapable when the settlement of River Inhabitants was reached.

"You booked for here, old hoss," said the driver, "so I must put yer down. But don't get lying on the track or staying out all night. Here, some of you boys," he went on, addressing the loafers who hung round the stage, "help him up to Aunt Corckran's; he'll get board and lodgng there."

"I guess I'll get down here, too," said Gibbings promptly. "I don't care to go any farther to-night. So show the way, lads, and I'll give ye a hand with this chap."

Corckran's boarding-house, kept by a mulatto woman, and called after her, was a mere shanty, with only two rooms besides the bar,

Podifat was laid in one of these upon a heap of newly cut spruce-fir boughs; while Gibbings, having despatched some fried pork and eggs, found a similar bed in another corner.

Next morning early, and long before the fumes of drink had evaporated from Podifat's brain, Gibbings started forth in search of work, which he meant to take as a colorable pretext for remaining in the settlement. He found it at a farmhouse, a mile out, where they wanted a man to tend the ox-team and make himself useful about the place. Labor was not too plentiful, and a likely looking fellow, even of Gibbings's age, who could turn his hand to anything was worth board and lodging and a dollar or so a-day.

Several days elapsed before he heard anything more of Podifat. Even then it was mere gossip, the talk of the farm kitchen, brought in by one of the sons of the house who had been into the settlement —something about a new arrival, an old fellow who was having a tall time, perpetually on the "scoop," standing treat to all hands at Aunt Corckran's and keeping it up till all was blue.

"Who is he?" asked the father. "What brings him this way?"

"He's come here for sport. He was talking with old Wagahua-cook, the Indian hunter, about moose-calling, after the first snow, promising to go out to his camp on the edge of the Barrens next week, and taking his chance of a black bear before they hide for the winter. He's got an A1 rifle, which he showed all round, and talked as if he could use it. I think he knew his way about. No stranger would want a pair of moose-shank moccasins, or be so spry about getting a good buffalo robe."

"Did you hear his name, Angus, or what he calls himself?"

"Podifat, I think. Aunt Corckran seemed to know something of him and his forebears."

"I mind some Podifats in the settlement years agone, and a precious bad lot they were. I'd say this was one of them, although they all went to the bad, as I believe."

Gibbings did not like to ask more just then, but he carefully treasured up in his own mind what he had heard, and promised himself to inquire further from Mrs. Corckran the first time he got the chance.

A week passed, and then another, before Gibbings had any such opportunity. He heard, however, from time to time of Podifat, who led a life of debauchery, alternating with spells in the woods after big game. It was during one of these absences that Gibbings visited the settlement, and halting his team near Aunt Corckran's boarding house, went in for a glass and a chance of a chat.

The dark-skinned landlady, an aged but still hale and hearty woman, was alone in her bar, and Gibbings, sipping his whisky, soon asked for Mr. Podifat.

"He's out—in the woods, after cariboo. You want him? Many folks want him. Some one—very nice little gentleman—was asking for him just now."

"Don't you remember me, Aunty? I came with him that first night by the stage, and I slept here too."

"Was that you, sah? I no remember well. But how long you know him, sah? You know his sister, sah? Very mean pusson that, sah."

"Where is she now, Auntie?"

"Can't say, sah; me have no dealings with any such trash. Very bad woman. Go away to Halifax, sah, years and years ago."

"By herself? In service? Got married? What?"

"Got big thumping boy, so they told Auntie. But why you ask so many questions—you the father of that boy?"

"Tisn't likely, Auntie. I'd have no call to ask questions then. Only I heard she was married in Halifax."

"I don't admit that's true, sah. But I heard of her 'nother time in service at Louisville, down by Sydney mines."

"All this is worth hearing," thought Gibbings to himself, wondering how he might manage to hear more. But the team was waiting, and Mrs. Corckran seemed disinclined for further talk. So he took himself off, intending to visit the settlement again.

As he left the bar a man came in fairly well dressed, wearing a big overcoat with a fur collar, and what is locally termed a stove-pipe hat. He might have been some land agent's clerk from the city, or a Yankee speculator prospecting for petroleum. But Gibbings paid him no special attention beyond giving him "good day."

He did not see that the new-comer started at the sound of his voice, or hear him ask Mrs. Corckran abruptly—

"Who's that?"

"Don't know zackly, sah. A teamster working out to Sandy M'Anespey's farm about a mile away. But your friend Mr. Podifat will tell you. They travelled here together a fortnight or more ago."

"Were he and Podifat good friends? Did they see one another often?"

"Reckon they didn't much. Anyway, this chap's hungering to see him now, wondering when he'd be back from the woods; pretending he knew him and his family and sister—all lies."

"Podifat's sister! What did he say he knew about her?"

"Nary word. Thought she was married in Halifax. But I knew better than that, and told him so. He was only asking foolish questions. Think he wanted to make me mad."

"Can I lodge here till Mr. Podifat comes back? What do you charge for board?"

"Four dollars a-week, sah. Make you very comfortable. You like to stay?"

"I'm on. I'll just step down to the stage office for my bag and be back before dark."

"Very glad to see you, sah. Perhaps Mr. Podifat come home by then."

CHAPTER LXIII.

WHAT THE PARSON WROTE.

SOME days elapsed before Gibbings paid a second visit to the settlement. This time he went without his team, on a simple message about some winter fuel. His business despatched, he went on, as a matter of course, to Mrs. Corckran's.

The bar was well attended that day. A number of sycophantic loafers stood around, sucking up freely all that Mrs. Corckran served out—whisky, and white-eye, and fine old Jamaica rum. It was all paid for, she said, and Gibbings at once knew by whom. There was old Podifat, a little more drunk than usual, leaning on the bar counter, talking about his prowess with the gun, and his unlimited supply of funds.

Gibbings took his place amongst the rest, meaning to await events. It was imprudent to talk further with Aunt Corckran just then, but he might get speech with her later, or perhaps with Podifat himself.

In the middle of it all a man rushed out from an inner room, went straight to Podifat, and took him roughly by the arm.

"Here, Jacob, you sot! drop all this. What call have you to stand treat?"

The voice was so familiar to Gibbings, that he bent his eyes eagerly on the new-comer. It was the same man that he had met at the door of the shanty a few days previously, but without the fur coat and tall hat. The face was plainly visible, and in spite of the small black moustache and the now closely cropped black hair, he had no difficulty in recognizing Mrs. Leleu.

Their eyes met. Did she know him too? He still wore his wig and beard, and hoped she did not penetrate his disguise. In any case, there was no need for remaining there—it was neither natural nor prudent. Besides, this was news that should be sent at once to Colonel St. Evelyn.

Swallowing his glass, at Podifat's expense, he went straight out of the shanty and into the settlement.

He was revolving in his mind now how he could best and most safely communicate with the Colonel. As we know, his scholarship was limited; and whom could he trust in a strange place to write a letter for him on such an urgent yet strictly confidential matter?

To whom should he apply? The police? Where was he to find a constable in this sparsely settled country? and could the nearest representative of the law be trusted when found?

A parson? Ah! that was a better idea. But there was none in in the township—no church of any persuasion, so far as he knew, within miles.

He went to the post-office in the general store, just where the stages stopped, and asked for a clergyman.

"What for? To tie you up? Won't the registrar do? Or, if it's a christening, leave it alone. As to burying, any one can do that. We've no use for a parson here. You must try across to Canso, t'other side of the Gut."

"Who shall I ask for, and how am I to get across?"

"Parson Lawford—that's the name. Go down to the beach; some one'll put you across in their whaleboat if you'll plank down a dollar."

The narrow seaway that divides the island of Cape Breton from the Nova Scotia mainland is known as the Gut or Straits of Canso: it was barely a couple of miles wide at this point, and the shore was not many hundred yards from the settlement.

Gibbings found a boat without difficulty, and was soon ferried over.

"Will you be long?" asked the fisherman who had piloted him, a hybrid creature in homespun, half backwoodsman, half sea-dog.

"I'm going up as far as the clergyman's, if you know where that is—"

"Up there; the red and white frame house above the church."

"I can get there, do all I have to do, and be back inside of an hour," said Gibbings.

"Make it that, stranger, and I'll wait; but not a minute more. It's easy crossing now, but the tide's making fast, the wind's agin us, and the race'll soon run seven or eight knots. Nothing less than a screw steamer could put you back then."

Gibbings promised to return within the time, but, as we shall see, was not so good as his word.

Scaling a rather steep track he entered a pine-wood, through which a path led to the minister's house. Asking and obtaining an interview, he proceeded to business at once.

The Rev. Mr. Lawford was a plain man, plain even to uncouthness—roughly, nay, shabbily dressed in a faded rusty black homespun coat, and trousers stuffed into long boots. He had an honest face, set in a fringe of stubby iron-grey hair, and spoke with a marked colonial accent or "burr."

"Want me to write a letter for you? I have no objection. You are a distressed seaman, I suppose—British or colonial?"

"Neither, sir. I will tell you exactly, if you will first take down what I've got to say."

"Go on, then."

"Honored sir," began Gibbings, dictating, "I write, as was agreed between us and your good lady, my respects to her and the family, and to tell you what I have been at since I sent you the first envelope. Well, sir, I tracked down that chap to his own home hard by here. They remembered him well as a bad lot, likewise his sister, who is now with him. I could take my oath of this, although she is not the same quite as when we knew her. She is that Mrs. Leleu, and no one else. But her real name is Podifat, or was—leastways it

must be if she's Podifat's sister, as I am prepared to swear. They are together now, in the settlement of River Inhabitants; but she is in different clothes, disguised as a man.

"Well, sir, that is not all. They tell me she had a son, but I can't hear who the father was. If it wasn't that we know he had another mother, I'd say it was this very Sir Hubert Lezaire. Of course, as I understand, Sir Hubert's mother was called Spary, and she is dead."

"What's all this you're asking me to write?" interrupted the clergyman. "And what are you doing in these parts? Are you a detective officer?"

"Oh no; not a regular detec., sir. But it's got to do with the great Lezaire case, of which you may have heard."

"Yes, something. There were inquiries here a year or two ago about some people connected with it."

"The last baronet, Sir Percy, ran off with a girl from hereabouts, who was the mother of the present baronet,—Spary, she was called."

"I know the name of Spary well: it was that of the previous incumbent here. But they're all dead, and that's what I told the agents who were inquiring. One of the girls had gone off—that was perfectly well remembered, but not the name of the man who took her away."

"It was Sir Percy Lezaire."

"So, it was thought, I remember now, and believed. But that was not the name, nor was he, as I have since learnt, the person. The man who eloped with Priscilla Spary was called Lehague. He came from Cape Breton, and they went back there."

"Then they couldn't have been Sir Hubert's parents. Who were they?"

"Why, Sir Percy of course was one, or how could Hubert be baronet now? There must be some mistake about the mother, that's all. Probably it is this woman Podifat I have written about for you."

"Then she would be Lady Lezaire, and she isn't. Trust her to claim it if she was entitled. But I am getting mixed. The matter wants better brains than mine to clear it up. Perhaps, sir, you wouldn't mind putting down what you have just said, all in your own words. The Colonel will understand better than if I told him."

Mr. Lawford wrote down a brief summary of the facts, which he read to Gibbings.

"Is there anything more?" he then asked.

"Only say that I will follow as fast as I can travel. There isn't much more for me to do here, and I'm pining to rejoin the Colonel and serve again alongside and under him."

The letter completed, Gibbings produced a second envelope with which Mrs. St. Evelyn had supplied him, saying—

"Sign, sir, in my name: William Gibbings. Then put it in this, which is all ready for the post. Will you read the address, sir, and make a note of it, for I'm sure my master and missus would like to see you and thank you if at any time you pass that way."

All this had occupied but half an hour, and Gibbings started back for the shore fully satisfied that he would find his boat and boatman still there.

But during his absence, two other persons, who had also crossed the Straits and landed higher up, came down through the fir-woods to where the fisherman was waiting.

"Are you the hoos that ferried a chap over half an hour ago from River inhabitants?" asked one, who was no other than Podifat.

"Yes, sirree. Do you want a passage back?" was the answer.

"No; no more does he. He sent us to tell you, you needn't wait," said Podifat's companion. "We were to pay you what he promised."

"One dollar. Hand it over then, quick, and I'll up stick and be off. The stream's getting stronger every second."

The money was paid, the fisherman ran up his big sail, and was soon far out in the stream on his homeward voyage.

"Now, Jacob," said Podifat's companion as they walked quickly up the bank and into the wood, "there's no one to interfere with us, and we can fix this job our own way. I mean to know whether it's Gibbings or his ghost."

"What odds? What harm's he doing?"

"If it's him he's come after us, and must have found out more than he ought to know. The game's getting desperate, and we must play close."

"You wouldn't lay hands on him?"

"That will depend. Let's watch him well; I shall know him, or I'm a bigger fool than I think. Hush! stand back—here he comes."

They withdrew in among the tree-stems, and were quite hidden from view as Gibbings, fearing no evil, hurried along the forest path, making for the boat he had left on the shore below. He passed quite close to where they watched, crushed against the very tree that sheltered them, and was riddled, so to speak, through and through by two pair of shrewdly penetrating eyes.

"Gibbings! I could swear to him," hissed one in a hoarse whisper into the ear of the other. "After him! Give it him—on the head! Now!"

Next instant Gibbings lay stretched senseless on the fir-needles that carpeted the path. As he fell his wig was disarranged and his beard went all awry.

"I thought as much. He has hunted us close. But the scent is overrun now."

"What shall we do with him? Finish him? 'Tisn't safe, Priss."

"Let's see first what he's got on him."

And with a few dexterous twists of the hand, the woman—the reader will have guessed before this that it was Mrs. Leleu—turned out the pockets of the prostrate Gibbings, and became possessed of all they contained.

The chief prize was the letter addressed to Colonel St. Evelyn, which had but just been indited, and which gave this precious couple all the information they required.

"This settles his hash," said Mrs. Leleu grimly, with a fell murderous look in her eyes. "Here, Jacob, take him by the head; I'll help with her heels. Now straight on to the beach. He shall be found drowned, if he's picked up at all; but this strong current ought to sweep him out into the Atlantic. If he is found, it will be said he was drunk and fell into the sea."

One! two! three! The body was swung backwards and forwards to get impetus, and then flung out into the fast-flowing eddying tide.

"He's silenced and done for," said Mrs. Leleu. "But he brought it all on himself. Cursed idiot! why did he meddle with our affairs? Come on, Jacob; we must clear out of here. Let's get back to our boat and cross as quick as we can."

"It's a bad job, Priss. They might bring it home to us, and it'd put the rope round our necks. You won't stay on at River Inhabitants after this?"

"That's as may be. I'm half inclined to go on where this letter's addressed. Anyway, we'll send it ahead of us."

"Never, Priss. You wouldn't let them learn all that's written there."

"D'ye take me for a fool? I'll tell them something quite different to that—something that will explain the disappearance of that fool there," and Mrs. Leleu pointed darkly to the streaming tide.

CHAPTER LXIV.

WHAT THE OTHERS READ.

THE racing swirling waters had sucked in the body consigned to them, and it was lost to sight for the few seconds that Podifat and Mrs. Leleu continued to watch it. But contact with the icy-cold water acted with immediately reviving effect, and with returning consciousness revived the strongest of all human instincts, self-preservation. Intuitively, almost automatically, Gibbings began to battle with the hostile element; and then, as he gained a more accurate idea of what had happened to him, he struck out manfully, with the desperate determination indeed of a man fighting for his life.

Although the current had at first swept him out some distance from the shore, the direction of the stream soon changed, and while still bearing him rapidly onwards, helped him in his efforts to regain the land.

Gibbings was fortunately a good swimmer, and he made a stout fight for his life. He deserved to save it, and he did; but it was a very bedraggled, disconsolate, much-wearied figure that emerged from the sea, a mile or more beyond Canso and near the mouth of the Gut.

What was he to do next? Still dazed with the blow he had received, benumbed with cold as he shivered in his dripping wet clothes, it was difficult for him to realize exactly what had occurred—whether he had fallen or been struck down. He looked around; a long reach of bleak coast lay in front, behind were dense pine-woods coming down to the water's edge. He must do something at once: the only chance for him was in brisk movement; that only could restore warmth and circulation. Should he go forward, or back? It was best surely to remain in the open country than plunge into the forest.

So he followed the coast, hoping to find help—to come sooner or later upon a farm or log-hut; perhaps he might meet with a fishing-boat that would give him a passage to the next settlement or town.

His wits became keener as animation returned. He began to remember all that had happened just before he had been nearly drowned. Almost instinctively, he felt for the letter which had been written for him—was it safe?

It was gone. Everything was gone—his pockets were absolutely empty. He had been robbed, he might have been murdered; and the disappearance of the letter told him exactly why.

"Those Podifats, of course. But I'll be even with them yet, if only I can get out of my present plight. And I'm not starved outright, or frozen to death," he said, setting his teeth, as he pushed on with renewed vigor.

The way was long and lonely. Not a sign of human habitation for miles and miles of weary, hopeless, aimless walking over rough and varied country; now wide tracts of stony rocky waste, now strips of slushy swamp and forest-marsh encumbered with fallen trees.

All at once, turning a headland, he came upon an open bay—it was Chedabuctoo Bay—and saw a small fleet of fishing-boats—small smart craft, as taut and pretty as pleasure yachts—lying at anchor close inshore.

A dingy belonging to one of them was pulled up on the beach, and a couple of fishermen who had landed in search of water were loading up with freshly filled kegs.

"Holloa, stranger!" said one accosting Gibbings roughly—"where have you dropped from?"

"Canso," he explained. "Cast away, and half drowned into the bargain. Can you take me aboard? I want a passage—anywhere."

The request was not received cordially.

"Who are you? You don't belong to these parts, surely? Can you pay?"

"I've lost everything. But I've good friends in Sydney, or Halifax. You shan't lose."

The fisherman conferred together, still hesitating. But in the end they agreed to take Gibbings on board their schooner, "The Pride of Arichat," destination still unknown.

"If the take is good we may run round to Halifax; then we'll

land you there. If not, we shall fetch Arichat before Sunday, and you can find your way on as you kinder please."

The fishermen were in luck, and so was Gibbings. They had caught their cargo of live mackerel and had put him ashore at Halifax within forty-eight hours.

A call upon Captain Sutton sufficed to refit Gibbings, and start him on a more prosperous journey, this time by steamer direct to Sydney, which he reached in less than a week from the day of his disagreeable adventure in Canso Straits.

Strange to say, and for the first time since their acquaintance, he was not very cordially received by Colonel St. Evelyn on his arrival at the Nom de Dieu mines.

"What have you been up to, man? How is it I have heard nothing of you all these weeks? I thought better of you," said the Colonel, sternly.

"I don't quite understand you, sir," said Gibbings, drawing himself up, closing his heels, and standing at attention, in the attitude of a soldier being rebuked by a superior. "I've had a narrow squeak for it, but I don't know as how I've done anything wrong."

"Wrong! And you on special service, so to speak! But it's always the way with you old soldiers. Directly you're on your own resources you take to drink."

"Drink, Colonel? What! in this belated country? Why, the liquor's only fit for pigs."

"Yes, and you're one of them. I've heard all about you. Drunk all about the place, like any disreputable defaulter."

"How did you hear, sir? Who told you?"

"Why, the clergyman of Canso wrote me word. It seems an envelope addressed to me was found in your pocket in one of your drunken frolics, and he thought it right I should know. I will read what he says, if you like."

"Thank you, sir," said Gibbings, smiling. "I'd like to know what the clergyman said."

"He says: 'Presuming that you take an interest in the man in whose pocket this envelope was found, I write to inform you that he has taken to evil courses, and gone altogether to the bad. He is constantly drunk, and in his cups talks very freely about your affairs. He says he was sent here by you to make some inquiries, but I can hardly believe you would intrust him with any delicate or important business. It is my belief that, unless he is got away from here soon, he will come to a bad end.' There, what have you got to say to that charge?"

"To think that you couldn't trust me better than that, Colonel!" began Gibbings reproachfully, but then he laughed outright. "That letter's all a hoax, written on purpose to deceive you—not by the clergyman, but instead of the one he wrote for me, which I put inside."

"God bless me! What does it all mean?" Gibbings now told in detail all that had been written in the letter at Canso, and all

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that had happened to him. "I see it plainly now. She sticks at nothing, this woman, and this substituted letter was cleverly intended to explain your disappearance. But come and see my wife; we must tell her all about it."

Mrs. St. Evelyn, gentle soul, had declined to be present when the Colonel reprimanded Gibbings, and it was with intense relief that she heard how completely the faithful old servant had exonerated himself.

"There is much food for thought in all this news you bring, Gibbings," she presently observed; "and the most curious part of it all is what the Canso clergyman says about Priscilla Spary—that she went off with a man named Lehague, not my father."

"Sir Percy might have passed under a false name," put in the Colonel.

"No, sir," Gibbings corrected him, as the best informed; "for the parson particularly said the man was known to be Lehague, and that he came from Cape Breton."

"What part of Cape Breton, I wonder?" asked Mrs. St. Evelyn. "If we knew that we might hear more of him."

"Possibly Louisville," said the Colonel. "The marriage took place there, we know. He may have gone straight back to his own home."

"Let us go over to Louisville, Colonel," suggested Gibbings, "and see if any such man is remembered there. It is not so many years ago."

"We must know, of course," said Mrs. St. Evelyn, "that there was such a person as this Lehague. Until we are certain that he, and not my father, married Priscilla Spary, Hubert's parentage cannot be settled."

"But if Hubert is not Priscilla Spary's child, whose is he?" asked the Colonel.

"That's what I said to the parson at Canso," added Gibbings. "I believe in my own heart he is Mrs. Leleu's child!"

"What! Can you mean that my father married that woman? Impossible!"

"I don't see my way clearly, I confess," said the Colonel. "It's a puzzle. Hubert must either be your father's legitimate son, which would mean that Sir Percy married his mother—or he has no right to his present title. Now Sir Percy, we are told—but this has still to be proved—did not marry Priscilla Spary. Who was really his wife? Not this woman Podiat; that's out of the question."

"Of course, or she would have been recognized when the succession was changed, and would now be Lady Lezaire."

"There is a big fraud somewhere, that is quite evident; and we are not far off the clue. The attempt made by these miscreants on Gibbings proved that. I should like to get over to Louisville soon, within the next week or two. I doubt if I can leave the mines before that."

"I could go first, sir, if you thought as how there was no time to lose," suggested Gibbings.

"No, no; you shall run no more risks alone. They are desperate people, and there is no knowing their next move. You shall stop here and recruit yourself a bit, and we will pay a visit to Louisville before the end of the month."

A few days later letters from England and Lady Lezaire brought a full account of all that had happened at Market Reepham and Straddluthorpe; the further and closer inspection of the Inverness and what it had revealed; the projected arrest of Mrs. Leleu, and her disappearance.

Lady Lezaire commented at length upon the pieces of writing found in the coat-pocket.

"It was your dear father's hand"—the letter was to Mrs. St. Evelyn—"at least so I thought at first sight. It was, and yet it was not; and it was so unlikely that he would be writing about such things as these scraps dealt with. There was a lot of repetition, the name of Podifat constantly repeated . . . 'My dearest boy, . . . he shall be heir . . . I will do it, by hook or crook'; . . . and more of the same sort. Now, if your father wrote that, how did it come in the pockets of the Colonel's coat? All this made Mr. Tinson suspicious, and we both examined the writing over and over again; then we compared it with other writing, and at last, on Mr. Tinson's suggestion, with the papers found in my husband's desk upon which the ejectment suit turned. If the scraps were in a forged hand, so was the confession, the writing was so much alike in both; and for the first time Mr. Tinson began to think that he and every one else had been misled. There had been a gross deception somewhere—a felony, a great crime, committed by some one, and little doubt that that some one was the woman Leleu."

"We are beginning to see daylight at last," said the Colonel. "I haven't a doubt now that Hubert is Mrs. Leleu's son. She wrote those lies."

"And lots of other lies, I expect. She's very handy with her pen. Of course she forged that letter purporting to be from the Canso clergyman," said Gibbings.

"We have no proof of that," said Mrs. St. Evelyn, "except that it is not the letter you dictated. However, it is easily settled. Write a civil letter, Ferdinand, to the Canso clergyman, and ask him what he thinks of it all."

"It's a small matter, except in proof of the bigger forgeries. How cleverly it was all planned! Of course it was her precious brat she wished to make heir by hook or crook. More than that, she removed the last obstacle, poor Carysfort, and cleverly helped to throw the blame on me. She must not be allowed to escape us now."

"What an awful woman!" said Mrs. St. Evelyn. "No one is safe while she is at large."

"We must help the police to lay hands on her," said Gibbings. "I don't doubt she will easily be found."

"I will go to Sydney at once and cable home. The police ought to know that she is on this side of the water,"

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The sleigh was ordered out, and the Colonel drove his smart pair of long-haired cobs, gay with streamers and merry jingling bells, over the deep snow-covered track into the capital or chief town of Cape Breton. He drove straight to the post-office, despatched his message to Captain Bracebridge as follows: "Leleu here—St. Evelyn," saw it sent off, and, satisfied that he had not been watched, went on to the Bras d'Or Hotel.

A little knot of loafers were sitting round the great stove in the bar as the Colonel came in. Some of them gave him good-day, others asked him what he would take; but he passed on without pausing into the dining-room, taking little notice of any.

But when he was gone, two men, who had been sitting with the rest, got up and left the hotel. They were old Podiat and his now inseparable companion, Mrs. Leleu.

CHAPTER LXV.

LOUISVILLE.

The little town of Louisville was not often honored with visitors. It did not own a hotel, although in more prosperous times there had been two or three. But now the postmaster was glad enough to board anybody whom business brought to the town, and they were few and far between. In the winter business was altogether at a standstill, and Mr. Jerram, the functionary aforesaid, would have been quite taken aback at the descent made upon his house if St. Evelyn's party had not brought their guns, their game-bags, and their decoy geese, which showed the kind of sport they were after. There were three of them: the Colonel himself, Captain Sutton—who with his wife had just arrived at the mines—and of course Gibbons.

Naturally the first talk was about the wild geese, which were daily expected in their usual migratory flight southward, the best places for watching their movements, and the number of bands that would be needed to build the snow shelters in which the sportsmen waited for their game.

Mr. Jerram had the fluency of a lonely man whose tongue was seldom untied in a genial conversation. He told them all he knew about wild geese and wild animals generally—a wide subject over which he ranged boldly but with no great accuracy. Then he passed to colonial topics—a subject of undying interest—and he denounced all who disagreed with him in vigorous language, including the lieutenant-governor, whom he declared should be impeached.

He had talked for an hour or more before St. Evelyn was able to bring the conversation to more interesting matter. But at last he put the question whether Mr. Jerram had ever known any people of the name of Lehague in Louisville.

"No, sir, I never did. There have been no such people here this twenty year—not since I settled in the town."

This was disappointing.

"Perhaps there are older inhabitants who may have known them. I am rather anxious to find out all I can."

"Is it curiosity, sir, or a matter of business? Maybe they were relations of yours; you are looking for money from them. Don't count on them. Anyway, they didn't make money here in Louisville: no one does; I don't, not in any line, and I try many."

"You sell pretty well everything, I see," said Sutton laughing, as he looked round the store in which they were seated.

"Yes, and make everything except a fortin. This is the general store of Louisville; it is the stage-office, and the post-office, and I'm the registrar."

"Oh, indeed!" said St. Evelyn, pricking up his ears; "how long have you been that?"

"Five or six years, or more. Ain't worth much. Few deaths in this healthy place; births is scarcer, because there are no marriages or precious few."

"There was a marriage registered here years ago on which a good deal turned. I suppose it was to you they came for copies of the certificates in the Lezaire case."

"What! that big case tried in London, G. B.? Of course I remember that. I gave copies of all the certificates, and did quite a good trade at that time."

"I was concerned in that case," said the Colonel, frankly. "It affected me rather seriously."

"Did it now? Well, well! Was you ousted by the other chap? That was hard lines. But it was all plain sailing, wasn't it? The register was not be gainsaid. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, if you're so pressing, and it is not too much trouble. The registers are in your custody, of course."

"Yes, sirree. They don't go out of my possession. I know the penalties. I've got them inside, in my back parlor, under lock and key. Step in, gentlemen."

The register was produced—an ancient volume, strongly bound and clamped, of the usual oblong shape—and they turned rapidly over its pages of printed forms filled in with varied handwritings, till they reached the two entries that had settled the succession to the Lezaire estates.

There, set down in regular form, was the record of the marriage at Louisville on the 23rd of August, 185—, of Percy Lezaire and Priscilla Spary, in the presence of Abraham Comfort, registrar, and two other witnesses. The register was also duly signed by the parties to the marriage.

"That's good enough, ain't it?" said Mr. Jerram. "I made six copies of that, with my own hand, and certified them, at a dollar and a half apiece. Best day's work I've had since I was in Louisville. What are you looking at, stranger? D'ye think you can a'ler
oh facts as those?"

St. Evelyn had been examining the register fixedly, but with no special intention. He stared at it abstractedly—he was musing in a vague, dreamy, disconnected way, rather foreign to his nature as a man of action, thinking of the strange events, sorrows, disappointments—crimes, perchance—that had followed from, or might be concealed beneath, this brief entry in clumsy characters and now fast fading ink.

Mr. Jerram repeated his question before St. Evelyn recovered himself.

"I? Oh, no, not in the least. Better and sharper men than me tried that. Of course the entry was tested, examined minutely? It might have been tampered with."

"Drop that, stranger. Who would you accuse? That book has been in honest hands for years—mine for the last five years—and no man should tempt me to do what was wrong. As for those that went before me—"

"No offence is meant, Mr. Jerram," protested the Colonel—"certainly not against you; but now that I have raised this question, I shall not be satisfied till I have answered it for myself in my own way."

He took the book close up to the little window, through which a stream of strong white light, reflected from the snow outside, poured into the parlor, and scanned the record attentively for some minutes.

After that he held the page up to the window against the light.

Then he returned to the table, and seeing his companions watch him with surprise, said in explanation—

"I only wanted to be quite sure, and I am not quite satisfied, I confess. Have you a microscope in the house?" he asked of the registrar; "or a magnifying-glass of any kind?"

"That's about the only thing I don't keep or sell."

"I have a field-telescope with me," said Captain Sutton—"the one I use in deer-stalking."

"Fetch it, Gibbings; we'll unscrew the lenses," said the Colonel; "that'll answer my purpose."

He brought the strong magnifier thus obtained to bear upon the open register close under the light.

"Here, Mr. Jerram, come and look for yourself," he went on after a long pause, as he handed over the register and the glass. "What do you make of it?"

"Erasures—nary a doubt of that. The paper has been scratched down, and there's fresh writing atop."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Gibbings.

"I could take my oath to the scratchings, and I reckon I'm right about the writing. They've used two kinds of ink, d'ye see?"

"How do you know that?" asked Captain Sutton in his turn, as he also examined the entries.

"Why, by the color and the thickness. The top writing's not in the ink we registrars always use. Permanent ink ours is warranted

not to wash out, and very black. The words over the scratchings are much paler, don't ye see?"

" You're right, Mr. Jerram, and I compliment you on your acumen," remarked the Colonel. " It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this discovery, and for this reason, that the words which have been tampered with are the names, the Christian and surname, of one of the parties to the marriage. 'Percy' and 'Lezaire' have both been written in the new ink."

" But why?" asked Sutton.

" Presumably over other names. We have been told that Priscilla Spary married Philip Lehague; depend upon it this is the record of that marriage, but the male name has been changed. And unless I am much mistaken, it is the same"—the Colonel turned over the pages of the register, and made another quick but searching examination,—" yes, it is the same in the birth certificate, the entry recording the birth of the offspring of this marriage."

" This is the rummest start!" said Mr. Jerram, presently. " It's quite clear there has been fraud, but there's no telling when or how."

" What ought to be done, Colonel?" asked Sutton. " Of course you will act on this extraordinary information."

" We must first of all ask our friend here to make quite sure of the register. It ought to be impounded by some responsible official."

" Can't you trust me, sir?" said Mr. Jerram. " I'll take good care of it, and swear to produce it intact. You can seal it up if you like, and the place where I keep it."

" It's too precious, Mr. Jerram, to be left in this God-forsaken spot, at the mercy of any ill-disposed people. I'd rather not let it out of my sight. I'd like to take it straight back to Sydney, and on by the first chance to Halifax."

" What's to harm it here? Who'll want to interfere with it? Why, think of all the years it's lain unnoticed in that cupboard."

The Colonel was thinking over the assault made upon Gibbings, and of the lengths to which these reckless Podifats would go in their desperate desire to hold their own. But he only said—

" You get sealing-wax and your official seal, Mr. Jerram, if you own such a thing. Make the register into a parcel, and hand it over. I promise you it shall be worth your while."

" I can't part with the book," protested the registrar.

" Then we'll take you with it," said the Colonel, with a pleasant laugh, which tempered his resolute tone. " You shan't be separated; only the register shall not remain here."

" Softly, gentlemen; no threats. I'm an official in the discharge of his duty—ready to give proper assistance to all who claim it—but I am also a trader and man of business, and in that aspect I expect to be paid for my time."

" You shall have all your expenses, never fear," said the Colonel, " and a handsome bonus, it all turns out as I expect. So make your arrangements, and we'll go back to Sydney this very day."

" If I must, I must; you're too many for me." Mr. Jerram admitted, with an air of resignation.

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The truth was, he had no objection to visit the capital at other people's expense. Sydney was better than Louisville any day; politics were discussed there more frequently and with greater fervor.

So the registrar sealed up the register formally in the presence of all parties, and put it under his arm. His wife, who would act as his *locum tenens* in all his varied functions, was summoned from the kitchen, and desired to fetch his blue blanket-cloth overcoat, seamed with scarlet lines, his great fur gauntlets, and his snow-boots and fur cap; and thus fortified and prepared, Mr. Jerram took his seat in the Colonel's sleigh.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE FIRST SNOW.

LOUISVILLE had not seen so many visitors, nor had "Jerram's" been so much in request, for years. Scarcely had St. Evelyn carried off the registrar than two other visitors, both wearing the hooded blanket-coat and high boots patronized by male settlers at that season of the year, asked for him at the office shop, and learnt exactly why he had gone away.

There was no reticence about Mrs. Jerram, a large loose-mouthed woman, who was as talkative as her husband when she found a willing listener, which Mr. Jerram seldom was.

"Such a racket you never saw. It was here one minute and gone the next. I was in the kitchen with a batch of new biscuits in the stove when he calls, and he says, 'I'm off to Sydney.' 'Why not to Charlestown?' says I, 'or Miramichi, a-wasting your dollars?' 'It's business,' says he. 'And who's to see after the business here?' says I. 'And it's all paid for by these gentlemen, and ther' will be more to come by-and-by.' And next minute he was gon—like a flash—in one of the other lot's sleighs."

"Didn't he tell you what took him so suddenly away?"

"Surely. It was all about that English case, the Lezaire case—you may have heard. They'd found a mistake in the registure—a 'rasure or something, and they were going to take the book into the Supreme Court."

"At Sydney?"

"Perhaps, or Halifax, or even London, G. B. Anyway, they've gone. They're to stay this first night at the mines, so Jerram said. The gentleman that stands treat was to give him a shake-down, and they'd all go on to Sydney to morrow."

"Come along, Jacob," whispered one newcomer to the other—the reader will have guessed who they were. "We must get back as slippy as we can. We'll call round again," she went on to Mrs. Jerram, "when the registrar comes back."

"Won't you leave any message? My master's bound to be home soon."

"It'll keep, ma'am. Shove ahead, Jacob; get the pony harnessed up. It's a long road back, and we shall have more snow before long."

The conveyance which had brought this precious pair to Louisville was a common country sleigh—a couple of planks laid on a framework, with runners. An empty box lashed between two upright sticks served for a seat, and a coarse, much-worn buffalo-skin was the only protection against the weather. The horses were a hardy pair of native ponies, shaggy and unkempt, but capable of doing long distances at their own pace. They had travelled already that day from the Nom de Dieu mines to Louisville, quite twenty-five miles, and they were about to do the journey again.

"What's your game now, Priss?" asked Podifat, gruffly. "I ain't had a bite or sup since morning, and the ponies ain't fit to travel."

"They've got to take us back to the mines, if they drop at the end of it. It's our last chance. I'm going to have that register, by hook or crook."

"What will you do with it?"

"Burn it, bury it in a snowdrift, or chuck it into the sea. Without it they can do nothing against Hubie, even if they lay hands on me. So shove 'em along, and we'll make the mines before nightfall. We'll lay by in the same place till we have made fresh plans."

Their halting-place was a wayside drinking-place, shanty-built, half a mile from the mines. They had visited it more than once already, coming out from Sydney on pretended business at the mines, and now used it again to stable their team.

"You are late on the road," said the woman who kept the place. "Are you going Sydney way?"

"Yes, missus; but the ponies want rest, and we thought to give 'em a feed here while we see a friend."

"You'll be wise to stop overnight, all of you. It's coming on coarse, and there's lots of snow to fall."

"I reckon you're right," replied Mrs. Leleu. "Anyway, we'll see. Can you give us a bite? Some fried pork or salt mackerel—anything, while the horses are eating their feed. Yes? Get it ready then; we'll step over to the mines."

Mrs. Leleu wished to reconnoitre the St. Evelyns' house. She knew its exact position, but that was not enough. She must, if possible, ascertain who were its inmates, and what they were about that night.

A toilsome walk through the fresh-fallen snow brought them to the edge of the clearing, from which they crept along the far side of the snake-fence quite close to the house. It was lit up, and lively with the sounds of voices and the jingling of bells. The sleighs still stood at the door, the horses still unharnessed, and St. Evelyn was plainly heard expostulating with Mr. Jerram.

"You don't go on another yard to-night, I tell you. You must take us as you find us, but we will do our best to make you comfortable. It's too late to see any one in Sydney, and the horses are dead tired."

"I wouldn't make so bold, Colonel; I'd loathe to put you and madam out; but it ain't a cheerful night to go further, and that's a fact."

"That'll do for the present," said Mrs. Leleu. "He's camping here to-night. I'll know about the inside of that house before morning, you'll see."

The Colonel's ways were hospitable, and he had long been debarred from entertaining friends. Rachel, brought up in the liberal ideas of English country-house life, was delighted to receive her guests, and the present was an especially joyous occasion. She had looked for some days of comparative loneliness, with the society only of Mrs. Sutton, and now suddenly her husband and his companions had returned, bringing Mr. Jerram along with him and his extraordinary news. Nothing in the house was too good for its guests. There was no stint; the store cupboards were ransacked, the great Canadian stove in the kitchen was laden with pots and pans, and quite a feast was prepared.

The festivities within—the warmth, the bright lights, the abundant fare, and the cheery talk—were in strong contrast with the dreariness of the scene outside. The snowstorm had increased in severity as the night drew on. It was one of those dense incessant falls seen only in these latitudes, which soon hide the tracks and lay the landscape knee deep in snow.

"It's going to be a snorter," said old Jerram, looking out. "The first big fall is always so. We'll want the snow-plough to get on to Sydney to-morrow."

"And the snow-shoes. You shall try them, Mrs. Sutton," said the Colonel.

"Soft falling, Etta," added her husband; "and you're bound to fall at first with soles of catgut a yard long."

"How thankful I am you are safe back at home!" was all Mrs. St. Evelyn could say. "If even you had been delayed on the road—"

"'Tain't easy travelling anyhow in such a storm as this. A roof's a room, and snow's better atop than below."

"And to think that there may be poor people on the road to-night," said tender-hearted Rachel. "Why, they might be lost, hopelessly buried alive."

"What was that?" cried Mrs. Sutton quickly, her hearing quickened perhaps by Mrs. St. Evelyn's remark. "Surely I heard a voice—some one shouting."

"Impossible!" said the Colonel. "And at this time of night. Here, Gibbings," he called to the kitchen, "step outside and see what you make of it."

There was a whisk of wind, bringing in a cloud of snow, as Gib-

bings opened the outer door and stood with his hand curved round one ear.

"Not a doubt of it, sir," he sang out towards the parlor. "There's some one shouting down by the snake-fence, but I can see nothing in this driving snow."

A sufficient summons this to bring every one out; and all the men, snatching up fur caps and overcoats, went plunging out into the deep snow that blocked up the pathway from the house.

It was not a dozen yards to the snake-fence, the limit of the property, and just the other side was the track into the mining village. There were sounds as of people there, and horses. Voices were muttering indistinguishable words, and there was now and again the jingle of a cracked sleigh-bell.

"Who are you? What brings you here on such a night?" shouted the Colonel.

"Whose diggin's are these anyhow?" was the answer. "Are ye gwine to lend a hand? Guess we're adrift somehow."

"Come on, man; the gate's this way. Lead your horses; it's all good going under the new snow."

Under the efforts and encouragement of the whole party the two horses in the sleigh were coaxed as far as the front door of the house where the light streamed out upon the newcomer. He was white from head to foot, but his face under the deep hood of his blanket-coat was that of a full-blooded black man, and he talked with a negro accent.

"Where do you come from?" repeated the Colonel.

"Tarnton, good lor!" answered the man, rolling his white eyeballs, and showing his glistening teeth.

"And where do you want to go?" added Mr. Jerram.

"Sydney, God bless you! Can't be much furder away."

"You'll never get on there to-night," said the Colonel, "or until the storm abates. I'll give you shelter here. No one would turn a dog away from his door on such a night as this."

"Will yer, though? Say, Cissy, old gal, wake up and hear what the gentleman says. My old gal's on the sleigh there, mostfroze alive," he went on, turning to the Colonel.

"A woman! Bring her in, man! It's rank wickedness to leave her out in the cold."

She was a curious-looking creature, this Cissy, and but for the petticoat-skirt might have been taken for a man. She had a man's blanket-coat on, with the high hood pulled well forward, and the opening was narrowed by a handkerchief tied high up over the face; but inside at the far end of this quaint head-dress—something like a poke bonnet—was a face as dark as her companion's, and a pair of gleaming eyes.

"Here, Rachel, Mrs. Sutton, some of you! come and look after this poor thing. Get her in by the kitchen-fire."

The womenkind quickly gathered round the belated black woman and carried her close to the great stove, where the snow that en-

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erusted her apparel quickly melted and made two great pools on the floor.

" Better get her things off and put her in a warm bed," suggested Rachel, full of kindly consideration.

" No, no, missie ; me do berry well so. Don't you make no fuss about me—I'm only mean trash : I'll get 'long fine here by the fire. Biemby me lie down dere, anywhere—so," and suiting the action to her speech, Cissy huddled herself into a heap in a corner, and left her helpmate to shift for himself.

That was soon settled. Peter Lycurgus, as he called himself, refused to make free with a white gentleman's house, and leaving his "old gal to fraw," led his horses across to a shed in the yard, and expressed his intention of sharing their stable.

When bedtime came, an hour or two later, the irruption of these two strange visitors and the cordial welcome accorded them was almost forgotten.

CHAPTER LXVII.

FIRE.

THE St. Evelyns' house was not sufficiently roomy to accommodate a crowd of visitors easily, but its masters did their best for their guests. The Suttons had a room to themselves, the spare room, the same which they had occupied since their arrival ; and this with the St. Evelyns, a third room appropriated as nursery, and a small den under the rafters for the Irish "help," made up the sleeping accommodation of the house.

It was settled that Mr. Jerram and Gibbings should make it out in the dining-room, which they could leave betimes and before it was required for breakfast. There remained only the old negro woman, who still lay snoring upon the kitchen floor, and who sulkily resisted all attempts to arouse her.

" I wanted her to share Bridget's bed upstairs" said Mrs. St. Evelyn. " But Frau Siebel is staying here to-night."

" She'll do where she is well enough. Throw one of those old robes over her," said the Colonel, and they left her as she lay.

" Good night, Mr. Jerram, said the Colonel, as he passed the dining-room door, immediately adjoining the kitchen. " You had better let me lock up the register."

" No, sirree ; I don't let that book out of my possession until I hand it over to some officer of the law."

" Take care Gibbings don't steal it from under your pillow," cried the Colonel, laughing, as he went upstairs. " Good night ! Good night !"

He was the last on the move, as he thought; but if he had returned to the kitchen he would have found Cissy no longer a hu-

dled-up shapeless mass of wet clothes, but an upright figure which had crept stealthily to the door, and stood there alert and eager to hear what passed.

"I was wellnigh smothered," she said, drawing back her hood and unbuttoning her heavy coat. "I thought they'd sit all night. And now they have gone to rest, how much nearer am I to what brought me here right into the lion's den? What can I do amongst such a mob of them? Four men, and three of them hate me like hell. That blackguard Gibbings, too, he's like a cat, with nine lives. But I'll fix him next time, never fear."

"How am I to get it?" she went on musing, as she crept stealthily about the kitchen in the red flickering light of the blazing stove, the door of which she had opened, peering into corners and exploring every inch. An hour or more passed thus between cat-like creeping about the floor and fits of motionless abstraction, as she sat gazing into the glowing fire.

"If I could only steal it in the night—they are bound to sleep hard, those two—steal it and make off at daylight. Jacob swears he could find his way, storm or no storm. I wonder if it's snowing still?"

She opened the shutters gently, and looked out on the night.

It might have been a preconcerted signal, for almost immediately some one approached the window outside.

Cissy, or more exactly Mrs. Leleu, started back, effacing herself, evidently uncertain what to expect.

But a gentle tap with the finger-nail upon the window reassured her. She lifted the sash an inch or two, while the person outside swept away the deep snow from the window-sill.

"What cheer, Priss?—how goes it?" The query was whispered so low that she barely caught the words.

"What of the night? Is it still snowing? Could you find your way out of this at daybreak?"

"Ay, before that. I can see in the dark—but it won't be that; the sky is clearing, and we shall have the northern lights to show us the road."

"There'll be more light than that, Jacob, you'll see; a big blazing torch. Just wait. But listen now. Get back to the shed harness the horses, cut loose the bells—mind that; and have everything ready to hurry off the moment I come out—any time this next hour or two. You be on the watch, and next time I open the shutter put the horses to. But don't stop talking here now, we might be heard."

She shut down the window as gently as she had opened it, and resumed her place by the stove.

"They might catch me in their room; they sleep light for all I know. It isn't safe to try that. The other plan's better and bigger, and it will rid us of them all. So easy, too; everything ready to one's hand. But I must get to work: there is plenty to do, and the time is creeping on."

She threw off her overcoat, which would have impeded her movements, and passed out from the kitchen into a little lean-to or scullery beyond, where there was a store of chopped wood and short logs for the kitchen-stove. She carried this, armful after armful, into the main kitchen, and stacked it round the stove. Then she went to the kitchen-cupboard, and brought out a large stone jar, she had discovered previously. It was without label, but the contents betrayed themselves at once by the smell. There is no mistaking petroleum or paraffin.

Uncorking the jar, she filled a tin pannikin with the fluid, which she poured over the fagots and brushwood, repeating the process until the jar was empty, and the firewood was as inflammable as tinder.

"The train's laid," she said, exultingly. "I've only to apply the match, and they will all be burnt alive in their beds. It will blaze up like a furnace, too, and I must get what I want right off, or I may be singed in the very act."

She looked round when the work was completed, and opened the shutter and then the window to increase the draught. Another moment was spent in putting on her blanket overcoat and re-adjusting her hood.

All now was ready.

"Here goes!" she muttered between her set teeth, as with the iron rake she dragged out a lot of burning embers from the stove right into the thick of the fagots, and then ran for her life to the door.

The whole kitchen was filled instantaneously with flame; great tongues of fire, strong and fierce, leapt up from the floor, and lapped the place in sudden insatiable conflagration.

For one instant this devilish woman paused on the threshold to look back upon her handiwork. Satisfied with its completeness, she suddenly rent the silence of the night with vigorous yells of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" then made straight for the dining-room, which was at her hand.

Its occupants were the first roused by her note of alarm. Gibbings and Mr. Jerram rushed out into the passage, shouting, "Where? Where?" But the question was answered by the lurid light that blazed out from the burning kitchen. The flames lit up the dining-room too, illuminating every part; and Mrs. Leleu took in at one glance the two mattresses on the floor, and the tumbled heaps of rugs and robes that showed where the men had been sleeping.

With one bound she was in the room and out again. A few seconds of frenzied search revealed the presence of the bulky volume, to obtain which this female had not hesitated to sacrifice a whole houseful—tender infants, helpless women, strong men, and all. She hastily hid the precious register beneath her coat, unfastened the front door, and escaped out into the snow.

By this time the whole place was on the move. Terror and consternation had possession of the household; affrighted women mingled their shrieks with the male shouts of warning and dismay. Sud-



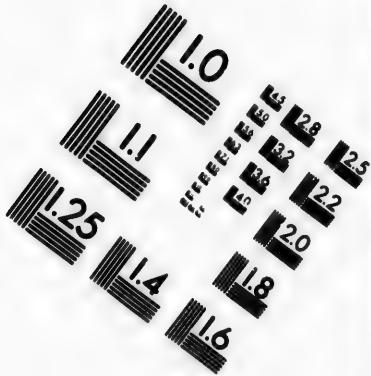
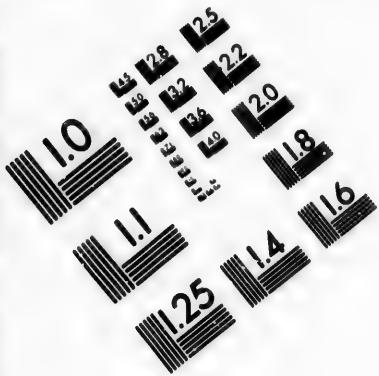
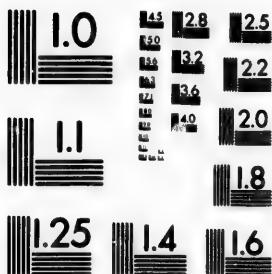


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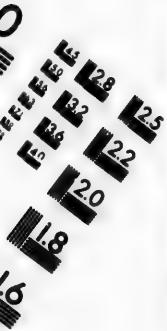


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denly, above the tumult, St Evelyn's sonorous voice rang out in notes of sternest command.

"Silence, every one, and listen!"

He was cool, masterful, self-possessed, like a soldier on parade.

"Sutton," he said sharply, "you see to the women and children : get them out of the house. Rachel, my dear, take your orders from him ; wrap up warm and quick. Go on. Ah, yes ! and send on to the village for help—one of the servants, they know the road best."

"They'll sink in the new snow. I'll go with the snow-shoes—they're hanging up in the hall." The suggestion was from Mr. Jerram.

"Good ! be off with you ! Now, Gibbings, you and I must tackle the fire. Where is it ? What can we do ?"

"In the kitchen, sir. Very little, sir." The man answered his master's questions promptly in succession. "The water's froze hard everywhere."

"Let's try snow : it may smother the fire. And we may isolate it ; the kitchen is built out, you know. Out with you ! Force open the window, while I bring shovels."

Gibbings, in spite of his excitement, noticed at once that the window was open, and wondered. By-and-by he remembered the fact, and understood it.

Two men shovelling snow through a window upon a raging fire were not likely to make much more impression on it than Mrs. Partington on the sea when she tried to keep it out with her mop.

St. Evelyn and Gibbings worked hard ; Sutton soon joined them. But the flames gained ground steadily, and it seemed certain that the old frame-house was doomed.

"It will catch the dining-room soon," said the Colonel. "We shall not save a thing."

"The register—did any one think of that ?" asked Sutton.

"Not I, nor Mr. Jerram. But I'll go back ; there may be time."

He ran into the house, deaf to the Colonel's expostulations, and was so long away that they feared he had been engulfed in the fire.

"It's gone, sir ! I looked high and low till I dared stay no longer. The wall was cracking. Save us ! what's that?"

At this moment the roof of the kitchen, a single storeyed shed or outhouse, fell in, with a tremendous crash. The uprights must have been burnt clean through, and down came the whole superstructure, letting several tons of newly fallen snow in at once upon the fire. The dead weight choked it, with a tremendous hissing and spluttering, while dense volumes of smoke rose from the ruins.

"Now lads, shovel away !" cried the Colonel, grasping the situation, and working with wild energy to pile on more snow. "Keep it under. It's mastered, I do believe."

There was not a doubt of it. The snow falling from the roof had suddenly and completely extinguished the fire.

St. Evelyn satisfied himself of this, and then hurried off to tell the joyful news to his wife. They were cowering together, all the

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women, in a corner of the warm stable, shivering, but more from terror than cold.

Confidence was soon restored, more and more wraps were brought from the house—for St. Evelyn insisted that until daylight came and the amount of damage was known, no one but the men should re-enter it.

"The kitchen is quite destroyed, then?" said Mrs. St. Evelyn. "But that poor negro woman—has any one seen her? Surely she got out in time, or can she have perished? How truly horrible! Oh, do go and see!"

"No one thought of her, I'm afraid. She made no sign, you know. Nor the man. Where is he, by the way? He never offered his help. Can he have slept through it all?"

They made search in the stable, but came upon no signs of him. What was more strange, his horses and sleigh had all disappeared too.

"I don't understand—except that they were curs and ran the moment the fire showed."

"That's about it, Colonel." The speaker was Mr. Jerram. "But they did not run far. I came upon their sleigh just at the entrance of the village. They were in difficulties with a drift, and had overturned. Some of the boys had turned out to lend 'em a hand when I came up with the news of the fire. I twigged our friends at once, and thinking it odd they should have slipped away so quickly, had them detained. It was just as well. What d'ye think one of the boys found in the snow? Look ye hyar!"

It was the register, which had dropped from inside Mrs. Leleu's coat when the sleigh had upset.

"I begin to smell a rat," said the Colonel. "Where are these two black folk?"

"Black, Colonel? They're only nigger minstrels. Why, the snow had washed it most off. We twigged with a lantern-light—"

"They must be taken care of, these two—kept close prisoners. I don't doubt now that the house was purposely set on fire."

The rest is soon told.

When daylight came, Colonel St. Evelyn with Gibbings went into the village, where the latter at once identified the pretended negroes as Podifat and Mrs. Leleu. They were now under the escort of a handful of stalwart miners, in whose charge they were removed to Sydney the same day, and thence by steamer to Halifax.

Several serious charges hung over them—theft, incendiarism, attempted murder—and they were at once committed to the city jail to take their trial at the next Colonial Criminal Assize.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

JUSTICE AT LAST.

THE case against Sir Hubert Lezaire was by this time conclusive and complete. The whole guilty conspiracy was unmasked; the whole plot, so astutely contrived and so recklessly carried out, was exposed to the full light of day.

Much new evidence was soon forthcoming. As the strange story circulated through the colony—and the crimes attempted at Cape Breton gave it a publicity the Lezaire succession had never obtained—many people came forward to establish Mrs. Leleu's identity with Priscilla Podifat, the sister of the man Jacob, who was her associate, confederate, and tool. It was proved, too, that the woman Podifat had once been in service at Louisville with the former registrar. Yet more—that she had had a child—a son—by some Englishman—a swell, people said—who had visited the colony five or six and twenty years before; and this information further investigated, brought out the surprising fact that the stranger was no other than Sir Percy Lezaire.

All this Colonel St. Evelyn, as he obtained the news, transmitted home. The discovery in the register was also sworn to by affidavits, and the book itself surrendered for safe-keeping to officials of the Supreme Court. There was more than enough now to justify a fresh suit of ejectment, and oust the so-called Sir Hubert Lezaire.

The business was intrusted to Mr. Tinson. The St. Evelyns themselves wisely resolved to remain in the colony until the case was finally decided at home. Besides, the Colonel was bound to appear against the Podifats, and the trial was not to come on till after Christmas. The interval he spent at the mines, still scrupulously attentive to the interests of his kind employer, who had helped him in the hour of direst need.

When the Podifats were arraigned a fresh detainer was lodged against the woman; and at the termination of the trial for attempted murder and arson, which entailed a sentence of ten years' penal servitude on both brother and sister, Priscilla was surrendered by the colonial tipstaff to two emissaries of the Thorpeshire police.

They held a warrant and a judge's order to bring her home to England for trial as the murderer of Sir Carysfort Lezaire.

The young interloper did not wait to be ejected. While his nearest relations, one of whom had risked everything for him, were playing the last cards in their desperate game, he was in trouble on his own account.

Old Fieldus had proved implacable. When he discovered the wrong that his daughter had suffered at the hands of the seductive but unprincipled Hubert, he had sworn to have revenge. The case he had commenced for breach of promise was expanded into a

charge of felonious abduction. It was easy enough to make out that Rebecca Fieldus was a presumptive heiress, and to bring young Podifat—that was the name and description under which he was indicted—within the act.

Hubert fled, but was promptly pursued and captured. The case was tried at the Central Criminal Court, and ended in a short sentence of imprisonment, which had not expired when Mrs. Leleu, as we may still call her, was brought back to England.

They now associated Hubert with her in the indictment for murder, and when the craven hound learned that he was to be put on his trial on a capital charge, he voluntarily offered to make a clean breast of it and tell all he knew.

He was allowed to turn Queen's evidence, and his testimony—against his mother, whose crimes had been committed solely for him—sufficed to convict her of the murder of the last baronet.

Hubert's story was circumstantial, and the jury believed it. Let me give it in his own words, as he told it in court:

"I never knew she was my mother—not till long after I got the property. How should I? She never treated me as a son, but was always on to me, bullying and bullyragging me, and saying I was good for nought.

"It was after I went back to live at the Hall that I first began to understand. She tried her old games, and I could not put up with her. I ordered her out of the place, and she answered back that I was only there at her pleasure—that she had got me in, and that she could put me out, and a lot more like that.

"I didn't believe a word till she showed me what she had written. She could write anything, in anybody's hand, and she had forged Sir Percy's, because, she said, I was his son, and ought to be the heir.

"I hid the coat—the Colonel's coat—for her. It was in her room till she went away, but she didn't choose to take it with her, and left me to find a place for it. I remembered the old North Lodge, and as it stood empty, I went there one night and put it in an old box there.

"Is there anything more you'd like to know, gentlemen?"

He spoke timorously, shamefacedly, like the coward that he was, and as usual with downcast eyes; but he had all the more reason, for opposite him in the dock the prisoner who had imperilled herself to serve him was glaring at him with wild rage at his base ingratitude.

He was questioned about the poison, its purchase, its administration. On neither point could he speak precisely, although he well remembered Mrs. Leleu's presence in the sick-room and by the bedside.

"Once or twice I wondered what she was at, but I never rightly made out. Only I guessed in the end. I knew then what she had done."

The summing up and verdict were a foregone conclusion. There

was no doubt of the miserable woman's guilt. Priscilla Podifat, *alias* Carlotta Leleu, was found guilty and sentenced to death.

No mercy was shown her—no commutation of the punishment. Poisoners never escape the extreme rigor of the law; and the wily deep-scheming fiend who had done one innocent young life to death and nearly wrecked others, suffered on the scaffold of Market Reepham jail.

* * * * *

A word or two more, dismissing the rest of the personages in this veracious history. To all, time brought its revenges; some encountered woes and worries not altogether undeserved; others, those especially whom the reader ought to be interested in as having endured great wrong and grievous hardship, found compensation in after-life.

The waters of improvidence closed over General Wyndham-Parker's head. The money-lender, Issachar, sued him on the bill he had signed for £10,000, and drove him into the bankruptcy court. He emerged with only a fraction of his former income left, which he eked out hereafter in a small Italian town. Neither he nor his wife could forgive Mrs. Sutton; and they kept so close a watch on the other girls, that no more elopements and no more marriages took place in the family. They had enough of Hubert Podifat, and his name has never since been mentioned among them.

Young Podifat—the name to which he of course reverted—disappeared entirely from Thorpeshire. Through the kindness of the St. Evelyns, he was helped out of the country to the Canadian far west, and he receives a small allowance so long as he remains away.

There was great rejoicing at Straddluthorpe when the rightful owners came back to their own. Lady Lezaire, backed up by Mr. Tinson, was at the Hall to greet them, and welcomed St. Evelyn as cordially now as she had detested him when he first arrived. The county, too, turned out in a body to make amends for the evil it had wrought, and the Colonel was raised at once to a pinnacle of popularity.

Gibbings came with his master to take up his permanent residence at the Hall. He is quite one of the family—no longer a servant, but a valued and trusted friend.

Another staunch friend in time of trial, Mr. Carrington Lomas, is one of the most welcome of the numerous guests invited to Straddluthorpe.

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